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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.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research investigation examines gifted boys who are underachieving in English at the Secondary level. This research builds full profiles of these students in order to understand causes of underachievement. The aim is to identify and remove the barriers in English so that these boys can achieve their potential. These gifted boys have so much to give and it is alarming to see that many of these boys are failing in our schools.

The disparities among male and female achievements in secondary English are extremely concerning. According to the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQA), females are considerably out-performing males in English at NCEA Levels one to three. Below is a record of statistics (obtained from NZQA March 2009) illustrating the alarming disparity between males and females in English.

	2006	2007	2008
Male	6773	7327	7726
Female	9329	9916	10678

Table 1: Number of students gaining University Entrance in 2006-2008 by gender

As Table 1 shows, in 2006 and 2007, considerably more females gained University Entrance than males. For these years, male achievement of University Entrance was only 73% that of females gaining the same qualification. This suggests that 27% more females than males are gaining entrance into Universities. In 2008, this disparity increased. For the last academic

year, male achievement of University Entrance was only 72% that of female achievement. These statistics suggest the gap between male and female achievement may be increasing over time. An investigation of NCEA English results illustrates a clear and concerning gender gap. The following two tables illustrate this gender disparity in NCEA English for the years 2007-2008.

	Male (%)	Female (%)
Level 1		
Achieved	61.2	53.9
Merit	28.7	31.7
Excellence	10.1	14.5
Level 2		
Achieved	60.4	53.5
Merit	27.5	30.7
Excellence	12.1	15.8
Level 3		
Achieved	57.4	52.2
Merit	28.5	31.2
Excellence	14.2	16.6

Table 2: Gender distribution for Achieved, Merit and Excellence grades in English at NCEA Levels 1,2 and 3 in 2007

Table 2 shows that males outperformed females in the 'Achieved' category in English for 2007. However, females considerably outperformed males in the higher grades of 'Merit'

and 'Excellence'. For 'Merit' grades in English for 2007, there was an average difference of 9% between males and females. For 'Excellence' the difference between male and female achievement was 8%. There was a clear disparity between higher achievement for males and females in English for 2007.

Table 3 below shows the statistics for 2008 NCEA English results.

	Male (%)	Female (%)
Level 1		
Achieved	61.5	53.6
Merit	27.6	31.0
Excellence	10.9	15.4
Level 2		
Achieved	59.4	52.0
Merit	28.2	31.5
Excellence	12.4	16.5
Level 3		
Achieved	56.7	50.8
Merit	29.7	31.9
Excellence	13.7	17.3

Table 3: Gender distribution for Achieved, Merit and Excellence grades in English at NCEA

Levels 1,2 and 3 in 2008

Table 3 illustrates a very similar trend for 2008. On average, 9% more females than males gained 'Merit' grades for English at each level of NCEA. Similarly, 7.5% more females than males gained 'Excellence' grades for English at these same levels.

These two tables and their statistics reveal two trends. Firstly, males are outperforming females in 'Achievement' grades at all levels (sometimes by up to eight percent difference). While this is encouraging, it is extremely disappointing to see the gender disparity in the 'Merit' and 'Excellence' grades. In all three levels of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), females are achieving more 'Merit' and 'Excellence' grades (sometimes up to ten percent more than males). This suggests that while males are achieving in English, they are failing to keep up with females at the higher levels. This trend also continues outside of New Zealand. The Research by Pollack (1999) shows that in England and Wales, girls of all ages are outperforming boys in standardised tests of literacy. For example, in the national qualification, the Graduate Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), 48% of girls are gaining the highest grade in English and literacy, while only 39% of males obtain this same grade.

According to these NCEA statistics, there are many male students who should be capable of 'Merit' and 'Excellence' grades (if the genders were to be represented equally) but are only achieving passing grades. Many children, even prodigies, do not become eminent in adulthood (Sousa, 2003). It is therefore essential that schools cater to gifted students. It is a myth that gifted children will make it on their own. "Contrary to what so many people believe, a gifted mind is not necessarily able to find its own way" (Kerr & Cohn, 2001, p.45).

The second trend is University Entrance. While numbers studying towards University Entrance are similar, females on the whole are far more likely to achieve University Entrance than males. In 2008, 2952 more females than males gained University Entrance. These figures suggest that females may also be over-represented in the numbers of first year enrolments into tertiary institutions.

Also of concern are the scholarship results in English for the years 2006-2008. Statistics obtained from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) on 22nd March 2009 for Scholarship English results are as follows:

Academic year	Female	Male	Total
2006	150 (68.5%)	78 (34.2%)	228
2007	257 (65.2%)	137 (34.8%)	384
2008	260 (67.7%)	124 (32.3%)	384

Table 4: NCEA Scholarship results in English for the years 2006-2008 by gender (NZQA, 2008).

From a close examination of Table 4, it can clearly be deduced that twice as many females are gaining scholarships in English compared to males. This large gender gap warrants further investigation.

There has been extensive investigation into why gifted boys are failing to compete with girls in secondary school (Alvino, 1991; Feldhusen, 2003; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Kerr & Nipcon,

2003; Koerer, 1999; Moltzen, 1995; Wolfe, 1991). These studies investigated gifted adolescents, underachievement of gifted males, and the performance of gifted males in specific subjects. Unfortunately there is limited literature into the phenomenon of underachievement of gifted boys in English. This research report will focus specifically on English and will examine reasons for the underachievement of gifted boys in English.

Along with the literature and statistics, it is my own experiences that have led me to this research proposal. From my personal experience, I have had the pleasure of teaching approximately ten boys (from Year 11 to 13) whom are moderately to extremely gifted in English. Of these ten students, I consider eight to have underachieved in English, or to be currently performing well below their abilities in English. Four of these gifted students failed NCEA Level One. Within this research investigation I hoped to better understand the reasons behind these boys' underachievement, while finding ways to improve my own teaching practice and the teaching practice of others.

During this research, I interviewed six English Heads of Departments (HODs) from the Bay of Plenty region. I wanted to assess the existing climate in secondary school English departments, particularly focusing on the extent of underachievement among gifted boys and HODs' perceptions of why these students are failing. I conducted phone or face to face interviews with each of these six HODs. Their responses clearly indicated that there is a need to carry out research into the area of gifted boys underachieving in English. Of the six HODs of English that were surveyed, every single one of them said they could name at least two male students who were gifted in English but were failing within the NCEA system. Five

of these HODs agreed that underachievement of gifted students in English was definitely a male phenomenon.

Heads of Department believed that elaboration of ideas was an issue for gifted boys. These teachers believe an inability to effectively expand on ideas may be a factor in underachievement for gifted boys, as these comments show:

“Gifted boys do not feel they need to explain their ideas. They believe they can justify themselves and their ideas in a single statement”.

“ Boys lack the ability and communication skills to explain their ideas in adequate detail”.

The selection of texts may be also an issue for gifted boys. Some teachers believed that texts currently used in English are more suitable to female students and are inappropriate for male students. Text choice may be a factor in underachievement, as the following comments indicate:

“Gifted boys need activities to connect with the characters of texts in order to fully understand them”.

“ Many of the texts studied in secondary school English are more appropriate or more geared towards females”.

The final comments made by HODs suggested that there is a clear pattern of unexplained underachievement for male gifted students. HODs were aware of the discrepancy between male and female gifted students in English, but were unable to explain why this occurred

and were unable to suggest solutions to the problem.

“My female students are blowing the males out of the water in English. I just don’t know how the boys can keep up”.

“It’s a huge concern. I have two very gifted students who are doing OK in English. But is ‘OK’ really good enough?”

“Boys have always struggled in English. I don’t know if gifted boys are any different”.

“I don’t know why my gifted boys are only getting ‘Achieved’ results. I would love to know though!”

“ It’s so frustrating! I have the most talented student, but he is just not interested in English”.

One prevailing issue seemed to arise among the six HODs: the belief that English is more suited towards girls in terms of the level of communication skills required, the texts, and the attitudes of the students. “English is better suited to females. Females are better communicators and generally enjoy English more. Unfortunately for males, it seems that English will never be their subject” (Interview, HOD). Some HODs even suggested that we should just expect girls to do better in English, just as we assume boys will excel in maths and science.

There is significant evidence to illustrate that our gifted boys are underachieving in English. It was the aim of this research investigation to uncover the full extent of this underachievement and to examine reasons for these disappointing figures. This research

investigation studies ten gifted students in-depth. Within gifted and talented research, perspectives and attitudes from the students themselves is greatly lacking. I will take this opportunity to hear from the students themselves about their attitudes and opinions of English and the reasons they give for their underachievement. These students deserve an opportunity to be heard.

The possible implications of this study are far-reaching. This study will highlight the needs of gifted male students in English and therefore will provide teachers with practical solutions to curb male underachievement in English. This research investigation will examine reasons for underachievement in English from the perspective of the boys themselves. These perspectives may highlight new issues or uncover areas that need further investigation. Although this research project will only involve ten gifted students, it is hoped that the results gathered and conclusions drawn may help teachers implement similar ideas with their gifted students. This also paves the way for larger research projects to examine the phenomenon of gifted boys underachieving in English.

1.2 Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this research study is to examine reasons for the underachievement of gifted boys in English by carrying out an in-depth study of a group of gifted boys, their families and their teachers. The research questions and objectives are as follows:

- 1) What do profiles of underachievement look like; who are these gifted underachieving male students in English and what is their extent of underachievement?
- 2) What are the common causes of underachievement?
- 3) What do these gifted students require from educators and what are the possibilities for further study in this area? According to their interests, needs and preferences, what could New Zealand schools be doing to improve the achievement of these gifted boys in English classrooms?

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the extent of underachievement amongst this sample of gifted underachievers. Surveys, questionnaires, work samples, school reports and classroom observations were used to build a full profile of the achievement levels of these students. I also conducted interviews with the students, their parents and their teachers to obtain information about their attitudes towards English.
2. To identify reasons for the underachievement of gifted boys in Secondary School English. This data was gained through a variety of methods: observations, interviews, surveys and questionnaires.
3. To build a profile of these students' interests, needs and preferences in the English classroom. This included making recommendations for future research and studies.

1.4 Organisation of the Thesis

This research report has been divided into chapters for ease of reading. The second chapter examines literature in this area. This literature review aims to summarise the major findings in this area and to detail the most recent studies. The third chapter details the research aims, research questions and methodology. The fourth chapter is a profile of each of the underachieving gifted students. This chapter summarises the information gained from the interviews, questionnaires and assessment results to create profiles of underachievement for each of these students. Chapter five summarises the causes of underachievement across the ten participants. Chapter six examines implications for educators and suggests areas for further research. In chapter seven, conclusions are drawn from the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Defining Giftedness

“Gifted and talented learners are those with exceptional abilities relative to most other people. These individuals have certain learning characteristics that give them the potential to achieve outstanding performance.” (Ministry of Education, 2002).

Giftedness in New Zealand schools encompasses a wide range of abilities and qualities. New Zealand educationalists identify intelligence, creativity, leadership, arts, sports and culture as areas of giftedness (McAlpine, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2000). Cathcart (2005) identifies six areas of giftedness that are recognised in New Zealand schools:

- General intellectual ability
- Specific academic aptitude
- Creative or productive thinking
- Leadership qualities
- The visual and performing arts
- Psychomotor ability

Literature commonly provides lists of ‘characteristics’ of gifted students to support identification. Although all gifted students are unique and diverse, these characteristics are commonly seen across a range of gifted students. Delisle and Galbraith (2002) believe that gifted students commonly possess the following five characteristics:

- Ability to learn new material faster
- Excellent memory of new information, making review unnecessary

- Ability to deal with concepts that are too abstract and complex for their peers
- A passionate interest in one or more topics
- Ability to process more than one task at a time

Some definitions of giftedness also encompass the Maori principle of service to others within their concepts of giftedness (Bevan-Brown, 1996). The Ministry of Education's definition also allows for potential giftedness. This suggests that a student does not have to be currently achieving at an outstanding level to be considered gifted. The potential for giftedness is what is measured and identified. In conjunction with this, New Zealand concepts of giftedness recognise that gifted students are not talented in all areas or subjects. Gifted students can be gifted in one or many talent domains (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Gardner (1993) identifies eight areas of talent that he classifies as 'Multiple Intelligences'. These eight areas are spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic, logical mathematical, and naturalistic. More recently he has made a case for 'existential' and 'spiritual' intelligences (Gardner, 1999). Many educationalists refer to Gardner's multiple intelligences, suggesting that gifted students are talented in one or many of these ability areas (McAlpine, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2000; Cathcart, 2005). These educationalists suggest it is essential to provide opportunities for students in each of these intelligence areas to ensure gifted students are able to demonstrate their abilities.

2.2 Gifted Education in Secondary Schools

A significant amount of literature has been dedicated to the topic of gifted adolescents and educating gifted students at the secondary level. It therefore becomes crucial to gain an understanding of the important issues and models surrounding gifted education for adolescents at high school.

Macleod (1996) has identified two major problems with secondary schools that can cause gifted students to underachieve.

- 1) The size of schools, number of students and timetabling make it easier for underachievers to hide. Teachers only see students for one hour a day, therefore may not be able to gain a picture of the student across all of their subjects.
- 2) There have been huge improvements in gifted and talented education in schools due to changes to the NAGs (National Administration Guidelines). However, few schools have formal policies and most GATE work relies on individual personnel.

The introduction of NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) has had important implications on the education and achievement of gifted students. Ministry of Education-funded research argues that an adequate level of challenge is provided for all levels of students with the addition of Achieved, Merit and Excellence grades (Meyer, McClure, Walkey, McKenzie, & Weir, 2006). Also, the addition of NCEA Scholarship allows students to study at a greater breadth and depth, while being recognised for their

outstanding achievements (Macleod, 1996). However a quick survey of educational online discussion forums (www.english.unitecology.ac.nz; www.tki.org.nz) shows the concerns of many educationalists. Teachers are questioning the willingness of students to aim for Excellence grades, especially because the same numbers of credits are awarded for an Achieved grade.

Myer, McClure, Walker, McKenzie & Weir (2006) studied the impact of NCEA on the motivation of students. Their research showed that students find it hard to be motivated to do more than the minimum eighty credits. They found that many students also indicated that there is little motivation to aim for Merit or Excellence when these credits carried no extra value. Their research also indicates that NCEA is currently promoting low motivation. Myer et al (2006) state that current NCEA system gives students the ability to opt out of standards, to avoid challenging assessments and to avoid external examinations altogether. Myer et al (2006) state NCEA is requiring our students to make decisions that can impact their career paths.

As a standards-based assessment qualification, NCEA has received much attention from educators. The work of Zepke, Leach, Brandon, Chapman, Neutze, Rawlins and Scott (2005) extensively examined the effect of standards-based assessment on New Zealand students. Their findings state that standards-based assessments potentially provide schools with the opportunity to adapt assessment tasks to meet the needs of diverse learners. However, they believe this potential is largely un-tapped in New Zealand secondary schools. Zepke et al (2005) also found that standards-based assessments may not be suitable for diverse

learners as they are tailored to the needs of 'mainstream' students. They believe more research is needed to examine the impact of standards-based assessments on diverse learners, including gifted students. "The most important area for empirical research is the impact of standards-based assessment for diverse learners" (Zepke et al, 2005, p.32). Their research suggests NCEA standards-based assessment may be inappropriate for gifted students and recommends further research in this area.

Gifted adolescents today are very much at the mercy of demographic factors (Moltzen, 1995). We are lucky to be in a time where much attention has been given to gifted education in New Zealand. However, schools have their own definitions, policies and knowledge base and there is no nation-wide approach to gifted education. Requirements and definitions can change from school to school. Ultimately a student may be identified as gifted in one school but not in another. Large roll numbers and timetabling can compound this problem, leaving many students to be left as un-recognised (Macleod, 1996).

2.3 Gifted and Talented Maori Students

In 2002, the Ministry of Education identified Maori gifted students as a group of students that require individualised and specific provisions. Maori gifted students were mentioned as a special population of gifted students, and the expectation was that all New Zealand schools had an obligation to meet their educational needs. "Maori perspectives and values must be embodied in all aspects of definition, identification and provision for gifted and talented learners" (Ministry of Education, 2002, p.3). However, research conducted by Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind and Kearney (2004) has indicated that not all New

Zealand schools are adequately meeting the needs of gifted Maori students. Their research uncovered a huge variance in the identification and provisions for these students. Bevan-Brown (2009) suggests schools are not adequately catering to the needs of Maori gifted students because they are unsure how to go about doing this.

Bevan-Brown (2009) believes the most important thing for schools to do is understand the influence of culture when they formulate their school definition of giftedness. Many cultural aspects are valued within Maori culture such as spirituality, intuitiveness and leadership, and these concepts need to be incorporated or recognised within school-wide definitions of giftedness. Bevan-Brown also believes it is important for schools to understand what constitutes giftedness in different cultures. For example, 'behind-the-scenes' leadership (in which students provide emotional support, guidance and leadership) is not a value recognised as giftedness in Pakeha culture, but it is valued as a gift in Maori culture (Bevan-Brown, 1993). She believes that intellectual and physical areas of giftedness are recognised and nurtured within New Zealand schools, but it is equally as important to recognise and nurture affective qualities (for examples spirituality, determination, serving others etc) as these are equally important gifts in Maori culture.

The research by Riley et al (2004) suggests that identification of gifted Maori students is one of the most problematic areas for New Zealand schools. However, Bevan-Brown (1993;2009) suggests this can be overcome. She states that observation is the most frequently-used method of identification for gifted Maori students, and this can be effective if it happens in a culturally-responsive environment (one in which Maori culture is valued,

affirmed and developed) and identification is conducted by a teacher who has a sound knowledge of Maori concepts of giftedness (Bevan-Brown, 2009). She also believes evaluation of products can be another effective method of identification, but products need to be examined holistically. Once a product or assessment is finished, conversations need to take place between the teacher and student to understand the purpose, vision and process behind the product. This is important to fully appreciate and evaluate the value of the product (Bevan-Brown, 1993). Bevan-Brown believes teacher-nomination can often be ineffective, as the majority of teachers within New Zealand schools are non-Maori and have limited understanding of Maori culture or definitions of giftedness. However, she does suggest that parent nomination can be one of the most effective tools of identification. There is some tendency for parents of Maori students to be boastful, but building a relationship between the teacher and parent, or asking the parent for information and profiles about the student can be ways in which to gain this valuable information.

Bevan-Brown (1993;2009) believes that current provisions and programmes for gifted Maori students can be ineffective, mostly because they do not encourage Maori concepts of giftedness. Bevan-Brown believes it is important for a culturally-responsive environment to be created for the student, in which they can bring knowledge of their culture into the classroom and be recognised for their gifts. Bevan-Brown (2009) makes many suggestions for appropriate provisions for gifted Maori students, including the study of prominent Maori people, who may act as inspirational role models for the students. She also believes it is essential to allow students to use their gifts to serve others, as this is a trait valued by the Maori community (Bevan-Brown, 1993). By providing gifted students with more culturally-

appropriate opportunities to showcase their talents, teachers can begin to more effectively identify Maori gifted students and meet their needs.

2.4 Gifted Adolescents

Gifted adolescents have unique emotional, social and learning characteristics that require specialised attention. Identification of gifted students at secondary school is far more difficult than primary and intermediate schools. Part of this is due to the increased size and compartmentalisation of high schools (Macleod, 1996). However it is also largely due to the nature of adolescence that makes this difficult. Gifted adolescents are a large, varied and diverse group. Characteristics of giftedness may be masked by social pressures, disabilities that have developed and behavioural problems (Moltzen, 1995).

The adolescent years witness great upheavals in the emotional and physical characteristics of individuals (Schultz & Delisle, 2003). Adolescence can also provide an opportunity for gifted individuals to gain a sense of self and acknowledgement for their contributions. Of vital importance in adolescence is the acknowledgement of the gifted students' talents and respect for individuality (Schultz & Delisle, 2003). Providing a broad range of experiences for gifted students should also play an important part of secondary schools, exposing them to new ideas, areas in which they may have abilities and supporting emotional and social development.

What makes the difference between an underachieving gifted adolescent and one who is

thriving? Moltzen (1995) summarises the four major factors in the achievement of gifted adolescents:

- Motivation – an individual drive to achieve and practice
- Enjoyment – enjoyment in a particular subject or topic can greatly influence the amount of time and effort they dedicate to this subject.
- Personality. Character traits such as curiosity, perseverance and a desire to excel have a huge impact on success.
- Schools and teachers. The appropriateness of the provisions given to the student and the recognition of their talent cannot be underestimated in their importance.

One of the most important aspects of gifted adolescence is perfectionism (Schultz & Delisle, 2003). Adolescents are constantly being assessed at secondary school through the many different subjects and teachers, and the urgency felt to move through the curriculum. However, for these gifted individuals, one assessment can be much less pressure than several assessments. Giving students one assessment that they can perfect can prove far less stressful than providing them with several assessments which they have to juggle to balance their time. Providing gifted students with perfectionist tendencies with one assessment can allow them to complete assessments to their high standards. Our job as teachers is to consider whether the curriculum can be compacted or integrated to include fewer assessments. Could several skill bases be assessed in one assessment? Also, a

classroom environment where risk-taking is expected and mistakes are an accepted part of learning can deter and defuse perfectionism and competition (Schultz & Delisle, 2003).

2.5 Defining Underachievement

Underachievement is a term commonly used in the gifted and talented education community to distinguish those of outstanding ability who are not performing to their potential. Underachievement has been defined by Davis and Rimm (1988) as “a discrepancy between the child’s school performance and some index of his or her actual ability such as intelligence, achievement, creativity, scores, or observational data” (p.279). Later research by Rimm (2003) defines underachievement as “a discrepancy between the child’s school performance and some index of the child’s ability. If children are not working to their ability in school, they are underachieving” (p.18).

Reis and McCoach (2000) have defined underachievement as a discrepancy between potential (ability) and performance (or achievement). This is in no way a derogatory term. A gifted underachiever is a student who has the potential to gain extremely high results (in the case of secondary school we would assume a gifted student would be gaining Excellence grades). However, an underachiever is not performing to their potential. This does not necessarily mean that the student is failing, but may be producing Merit grades when they are capable of Excellence grades. In most cases documented, gifted underachievers are still passing in our schools, but they are ‘coasting’ along without having to really push themselves. Unfortunately these gifted underachievers often go un-recognised as they are still achieving within our schools and their potential may go un-noticed for the duration of

their high school life (Kerr & Cohn, 2001).

The term underachievement is used widely by the gifted education field in New Zealand and not just internationally. The Ministry of Education handbook (2000) on gifted education commonly refers to underachievement as a term to identify those who are gifted but are underachieving in schools. The Working Party for the Ministry of Education (2001-2002) makes various recommendations to schools, educators and researchers about the importance of underachievement among gifted students and the important place this must take in future research and professional development. Similarly, Roger Moltzen's textbook (2004), *Gifted and Talented Education: New Zealand Perspectives* dedicates two chapters to underachievement. Moltzen's textbook is the only such book in the New Zealand gifted community and reference is made to underachievement throughout the textbook, by various authors. Therefore underachievement is a commonly-used definition and term used in New Zealand education.

Underachievement can result when a gifted student acquires some complex behaviours that erode academic performance (Moltzen, 2004). Sousa (2003) states that the characteristics of gifted students are a lack of effort, unfinished work and seeming inability to concentrate. However, underachievement is content and situation and specific (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003). Gifted students can succeed in some situations and not in others. Gifted underachievers generally display any of three behavioural responses to the school setting: non-communicative and withdrawn, passively compliant and aggressive/disruptive. All three behaviours demonstrate low or unrealistic self-concept, negative attitudes towards

school in general and are commonly found in students who are distracted and disengaged in class (Sousa, 2003).

For the purposes of this research, students will not necessarily be chosen because they are failing, but because they are gaining Achieved and Merit results when they should be achieving Excellence. The term 'underachievement' should be seen in a positive light wherever possible. The aim of this research is to acknowledge the talent and potential these students have and to help them achieve. The purpose of this research is to make students feel good about their potential and what they could achieve. Throughout their involvement, participants will be made aware that they have been selected because of their extraordinary gifts and talents and that the aim of this project is to help them achieve to their capabilities.

Although underachievement may seem a negative or derogatory term, it does not constitute failure, only those students who could be achieving at a higher level than they are currently achieving. There are no other terms that have the same definition in this field; therefore I feel it is an appropriate choice for this research study. It has a positive connotation and at all times will be used to celebrate the potential of these students.

2.6 Gifted Boys

Kerr and Cohn (2001) define male giftedness as "boys who are advanced for their age in one or more talent domains" (p.39). Numerous studies have examined the phenomenon of gifted boys, realising that they are a unique, diverse and challenging group of students.

Educationalists and researchers seem to have a strong awareness that these students require specialised attention and interventions.

Two important studies of gifted boys have focused on tracking gifted male students as they leave high school and move into tertiary education then the work force. The first of these studies is the Illinois Valedictorian Study (1981, cited in Kerr & Cohn, 2001). In this study, the researchers tracked 81 Valedictorians beyond high school. The study found that men did well in College, but few of these gifted students achieved eminence. At 26 years of age, many of these males were disillusioned by their current jobs and career aspirations.

Similarly the Presidential Scholars Study by Felice Kauffman (1964-1968, cited in Kerr & Cohn, 2001) followed male Scholars who were among the top one percent of males academically. Their study found that males were not often successful in their fields, but were more likely to gain success if they had male mentors or role models, or had 'fallen in love' with their career area.

Several studies have attempted to uncover reasons for success and/or failure among gifted males. The James Alvino Free Spirit Study (1988, cited in Kerr & Cohn, 2001) examined 157 boys, aged between 11 and 14. The students were given a 15 item questionnaire which asked them about their attitude towards education. The participants stated that perfectionism, suppression of emotions and creativity and keeping their gifts hidden were their biggest concerns and the largest impediments to their success. The Herbert Study (2000, cited in Kerr & Cohn, 2001) examined six gifted boys in a very poor high school and asked them what kept them motivated. Students believed intact supportive families, a

belief in self and a multicultural awareness were the most crucial factors to their success.

With most relevance to New Zealand education, Celia Lashlie's study 'Good Man Project' (2005) examined boys' high schools and what they were doing well for male students.

Lashlie found three major themes emerged; students desire to live in the moment and often leave things until the last minute, students are pragmatic and will assess whether they should do something, and male students learn best through play. According to Lashlie, we cannot expect boys to always be seated in the classroom.

Why do boys underachieve more often than females, particularly at secondary school?

Critics have suggested several reasons. Wolfe (1991) states, "discussion of underachievers often overlooks gifted high school males achieving well, but not near the academic levels of which they are capable" (p.181). This suggests that we may be expecting less of our boys in the English classroom, or assuming that a mark of 'Achieved' does not mean they are underachieving because they are still passing. Koerer (1999) agrees expectations is one of the most common reasons for this underachievement trend; assuming males will be more rambunctious, to ignore directions and to produce sloppy assignments. Do we as teachers need to hold the same expectations for our male students as we hold for our female students?

Kerr and Cohn (2001) state "the vast majority of child and adolescent underachievers, by any definition, are male" (p.178). Pollack (1999) believes gifted male students have a 'mask

of masculinity bravado' that hides their genuine feelings in an attempt to conform to society's masculine expectations. He believes their 'true' emotions only become obvious when boys go 'over the edge', for example when they are underachieving. Pollack's research suggests studying gifted male students while they are underachieving may be the best time to uncover what they are truly thinking and feeling and get an honest insight into their state of mind. This 'mask of bravado' may be difficult for educationalists to see through; gifted male students may be struggling emotionally, but may be hiding it. This suggests it may be difficult to uncover the 'true' feelings and emotions of gifted male students.

One reason for male achievement that has received much attention has been the idea of cultural conditioning. Critics such as Alvino (1991) and Kerr and Nicpon (2003) believe the main reason behind underachievement in gifted boys is cultural conditioning: restrictions and expectations our society places on gender. Alvino (1991) states that highly creative or sensitive males can suffer frustration at having to conform to expectations of male 'toughness'. He also argues that boys who are interested in art, dance or nurturing roles are punished for being different. "Boys in general are not given permission to express their emotions; for gifted boys in particular, this can be especially limiting to the development of their creativity, intuition and spirituality" (Alvino, 1991, p.176). Kerr and Nipcon (2003) also argue that gifted boys are expected to live up to strict stereotypes of masculinity. However they also state that today's young men have few appropriate ways of establishing their identities as men.

Kerr and Nicpon (2003) believe that active underachievement is one way in which boys assert their masculinity. "Underachievement may be a way in which gifted boys define their masculinity" (Kerr & Nipcon, 2003, p.493). They refer to the 'Bartleby syndrome' – an increasingly observed behaviour in gifted boys in which they politely refuse to complete homework or classroom tasks (Kerr & Nipcon, 2003). They believe the Bartleby syndrome is an easy way for a boy to establish a newly developing masculine identity, and to overcome a growing sense of boredom and lack of achievement. This syndrome is particularly observable at secondary school, as boys begin to lose the sense of achievement they used to feel when completing tasks (Feldhusen, 2003).

Another reason commonly stated for the underachievement of gifted boys is perfectionism. "Perfectionism is a problem for gifted children in general, but may be more so for gifted boys raised in an environment stressing competition, achievement and success" (Alvino, 1991, p.177). A 1987 study in *Gifted Child Quarterly* (cited in Alvino, 1991) found that giftedness is an advantage for girls, but not for boys. Gifted boys tended to have lower self-satisfaction than gifted girls and non-gifted boys when you measure the difference between their ideal selves and perceived actual self. Gifted boys clearly feel under pressure to perform.

Social issues are undoubtedly an important issue for gifted boys, in quite a different way from gifted females. The stereotype of the 'nerd' is a risk for gifted boys, unless they are seen as achieving in sports also (Alvino, 1991). In a Free Spirit survey, fifty percent of gifted

boys admitted to hiding their abilities just to fit in with their peers (Alvino, 1991). “Most gifted boys learn early that it is acceptable for them to be gifted if they are also athletically competent” (Kerr & Nipcon, 2003, p.496). Wolfe states that gifted boys often lag in social skills, restricting them from taking part in leadership roles and social affairs. Wolfe (1991) finds that the phenomenon of having few social skills is found more commonly in gifted males than females. Another social issue faced by gifted boys is the unwillingness to attempt or succeed in areas that are considered female domains. Although it is commonly known that boys dominate maths and science, boys consistently achieve lower marks in the arts than females. Could this be due to feeling English is a subject dominated by females? Kerr and Cohn (2001) find that leadership within schools is now more than ever considered a female domain. They believe it is this association with females that is preventing gifted male adolescents from taking up the leadership roles they did in the past.

2.7 Male Underachievement in Adolescence

Why does underachievement in males become so obvious in adolescence? Wolfe (1991) believes that adolescence is a time of great change and males are less able to deal with these great upheavals. Wolfe states that adolescent males will show their distress in observable ways such as lower grades or a change in participation in classroom or extra-curricular activities. These are important characteristics that we as English teachers should be aware of. Adolescence is a time of great change, which can have significant and dire consequences on the achievement of a gifted male.

Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) believe adolescence is a time of pragmatism for gifted students, one in which they take control over their learning. Kanevsky and Keighley identify five crucial factors that determine the extent of a student's engagement and productivity. Control, choice, challenge, complexity and caring teachers are all considered to be important factors in motivating a student to achieve. In their studies, Kanevsky and Keighley found that participants attributed the increasing boredom to a gradual decline in the 5 'Cs' in high school. According to their studies, students are not given the same level of choice and challenge in high school as primary and intermediate schools, and are therefore becoming less engaged. Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) believe that the restrictions and lack of variety in high schools is a contributing factor in the underachievement of gifted students.

2.8 Causes of Underachievement

"Either the student doesn't know how to play the school achievement game or is choosing not to play it" (Heacox, 1991, p.1). The causes of underachievement are complex and perpetuated by a number of contributing factors – family, access to resources and personality traits (particularly low self-esteem, procrastination and self-criticism) (Fehrenback, 1993).

The characteristic found most frequently among underachieving gifted children is low self-esteem (Rimm, 2003). Often children acknowledge that they are intelligent, but they do not believe themselves capable of accomplishing what their families or teachers expect of them. This may be masked with 'I don't care' attitudes or disruptive behaviour (Rimm, 2003). Underachievement caused by low self-esteem can be characterised by procrastination,

incomplete assignments, disorganisation, inattention and careless work (Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) found that underachieving gifted students resemble underachievers in general more than they resemble gifted students. They are socially immature, have lower self-concepts and have a stronger tendency towards antisocial behaviour.

Secondary school students have already accomplished thirty-five to fifty percent of the skills they will be taught in a grade before entering it (Reis & Purcell, 1993 cited in Rimm, 2003). Clearly boredom becomes an important factor in underachievement. Reis (1998) argues that gifted and talented students show integrity and courage when they choose not to complete work below their intellectual level. Many students are underachieving due to an inappropriate and un-motivating curriculum. Pre-testing can highlight the knowledge and skills that students have already acquired. In conjunction, curriculum compacting can be utilised by teachers to eliminate material students have already mastered and can provide opportunities for students to develop and advance their knowledge and skills. Curriculum compacting can become a vital strategy for engaging the gifted student who already knows the curriculum.

Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) conducted a study of gifted adolescents to investigate what causes underachievement. One of their findings was particularly surprising. When faced with an inappropriate curriculum, many gifted students believe the honourable action is to disengage from it and quit producing. Therefore our gifted students may be consciously choosing not to complete work that is considered too easy as a moral decision. Deslile

(1992) also believes gifted students often choose not to complete work due to the level of ability. Through various studies of gifted students, Deslile has distinguished gifted 'non-producers' from 'underachievers'. Deslile believes non-producers are at risk academically but not psychologically. These non-producers are self-assured, independent and have chosen not to attend classes or complete school assignments because they are boring or irrelevant. The pragmatic behaviour of gifted students may play an important role in their underachievement, particularly faced with work of an inappropriate level.

2.9 Curbing Underachievement

Fehrenback (1993) details a programme in a Midwestern school district in the U.S. dedicated to curbing underachievement in its gifted students. Identified students had two choices: to enrol in specific courses designed for the gifted or receive individualised instruction in which they could work on topics of interest. By far the most common choice was individualised topics, with all enrolled students gaining a passing mark. The programme was based on the key elements of matching goals to student interests, discussions about what it is to be gifted, opportunities for competitions and mentoring. The programme was developed to change patterns of underachievement into patterns of success.

Individualisation was the key element in the success of the secondary programme (Fehrenback, 1993). This simple yet effective strategy of individualisation has the potential to be incorporated into English classrooms, giving students choices and basing topics on areas of student interest.

Kerr and Cohn (2001) believe that simply changing a child's academic placement so that it is more appropriately challenging can solve many problems related to underachievement. This suggests careful assessment and placement of gifted students may be a vital step in curbing achievement.

Moltzen (2004) lays out a programme for intervention and remediation that can be applied for underachieving students, particularly those who have become disengaged or are failing at school. This model has been adapted from the TRIFOCAL model developed by Rimm (1986).

- 1) Assessment of the student's abilities, strengths and problem areas.
- 2) Communication with parents
- 3) Changing expectations – parents, teachers and self
- 4) Role model identification – matching them with an achieving person outside the family.
- 5) Correct skill deficiencies; IEPs are particularly useful in doing this
- 6) Modification of reinforcement at home and school. Try to remove factors that enforce underachievement and introduce appropriate reinforcements of achievement.

Ultimately a plan that involves the student, the family and the teachers will be the most effective in making positive changes to the students' behaviour and attitudes.

2.10 Conclusion

Gifted education has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past two decades in New Zealand. As a result of the regulations by the Ministry of Education and Working Party recommendations, all schools are now required to meet the needs of gifted students. This involves having a school-wide definition, clear and transparent identification procedures and appropriate provisions and programmes in place to meet the needs of students. These regulations also require schools to meet the needs of gifted students who are currently underachieving in our secondary schools. However, there is no national approach to gifted education. There is no nation-wide definition of giftedness and schools vary considerably in the provisions they provide for gifted students. While gifted education has come a long way in New Zealand, there is still considerable work to be done to ensure the needs of all gifted students are being met.

The literature suggests that underachievement among gifted students is a complex and context-specific phenomenon. Identification of gifted underachievers can be problematic, especially if students are passing or achieving pleasing results. However, all literature states that gifted underachievers can be identified by a discrepancy between their potential and their current performance. Gifted underachievers are those achieving below a measure of their potential capabilities.

Rather than having one common cause or trigger, the literature suggests that underachievement is individual and can result due to a number of different and inter-related factors. Boredom, lack of motivation and lack of relevance were all cited as reasons leading to underachievement among gifted students. However, most of the literature suggests gifted students are making a conscious decision not to complete work if it is too easy or does not contain enough motivation.

Although there is a wealth of literature relating to giftedness, underachievement and male students, there is a disappointing lack of literature that combines these three areas and examines the phenomenon of underachievement among male students. There is also a lack of literature that examines this phenomenon within the context of English as a subject.

Although there is some literature that examines these concepts of an international stage, this research study will be the first to examine this phenomenon in a New Zealand context and within our public secondary schools.

The literature clearly highlights the fact that gifted underachievement is primarily a concern for male students. Gifted male students are well behind their female counterparts and many English Heads of Departments believe gifted underachievement is primarily a male phenomenon. This literature review is strongly suggesting that we need interventions in order to curb the underachievement of gifted boys. As illustrated by the literature, these boys have special needs and interests that need to be met to ensure their success. It may become apparent that our NCEA English programmes are not meeting the unique needs of

these gifted boys. The strong message from this literature is that we need to make changes to ensure the success of our gifted boys. Continuing as we have been is not going to improve the dramatic gender inequities in English.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Underachievement is most commonly defined as a discrepancy between potential (ability) and performance (or achievement) (Reis & McCoach, 2000). The term 'underachievement' is widely-used in gifted education fields, both within New Zealand and internationally, to describe the phenomenon of gifted students who are under-performing. These students are not necessarily failing, but are achieving results well below their potential. National and international literature examines many various reasons for the underachievement of gifted students in our schools, but very few pieces of literature examine this phenomenon from the perspective of the students themselves. This research is an attempt to view underachievement from the perspective of the students so that we can fully understand the reasoning, attitudes and beliefs behind gifted underachievement.

The aim of this study is to build a rich profile of gifted male students who are underachieving in English at the secondary level. This study will utilise interviews, questionnaires, work samples and observations to build up a profile of ten male students who are gifted in English but are considered to be underachieving. The profiles will include information about these students' characteristics, behaviours, talents, attitudes and opinions. Building a profile of these gifted boys will allow conclusions to be drawn about the reasons for their underachievement.

3.2 Chosen Methodology

This research project is predominantly qualitative. Data collection was focused on interviews, samples of work and observations. By utilising these methods, I was trying to describe the phenomenon in as much detail as possible. Mutch (2005) states the aim of qualitative research is “to illuminate the experience or understanding for others but not to generalise from it” (p.19).

My research project was based around theory-generation (also called inductive logic or grounded theory). I did not start with a theory, but instead aimed to end up with theory developed from the results and conclusions drawn. This inductive logic allowed me to maintain an open mind.

This research required me to take a subjectivist approach. Subjectivist approaches suggest that the world is constructed by individuals on the basis of their experience (Mutch, 2005). This subjectivist approach will lead to a range of possible explanations and conclusions. The purpose of this subjectivist approach is to uncover how individuals or groups perceive their world or make sense of it (Bell, 2005). This subjectivist approach allowed the perceptions and opinions of the students to play an important part of this research.

Similarly, I took a critical approach to this research investigation. Bell (2005) defines a critical approach as “a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond the surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions

and build a better world for themselves” (p.74). This critical approach fits with the focus of this study: to uncover reasons for the underachievement of gifted boys in English.

3.3 Selection of Participants

The intended participants are male students who are gifted in the area of English but who are presently underachieving in this subject. For the purposes of the study, the following definition was used to identify gifted students. “Gifted and Talented learners are those with exceptional abilities relative to most other people. These individuals have certain learning characteristics that give them the potential to achieve outstanding performance...Students who exhibit characteristics of giftedness or talent have learning needs that are significantly different from those of other children. They require different learning opportunities and may need emotional and social support to realise their potential” (Office of the Minister of Education, 2002, p.6).

Underachievement will be defined as “a discrepancy between the child’s school performance and some index of his or her actual ability such as intelligence, achievement, creativity, scores or observational data” (Davis & Rimm, 1998, p.279). This term is widely used within gifted education to identify those students who are gifted but are achieving below their potential. This does not necessarily mean that students are failing, but that their achievement is lower than would be expected. Therefore participants will be those who have shown immense talent in English but are gaining results well below their capabilities.

Ten participants were chosen for this research study. Because of the particular requirements for this study, random selection was impossible. However, all measures were taken to ensure that I, the researcher, did not currently teach any of these participants. Therefore potential role conflict was reduced.

The main source used to identify potential participants was the school's 'Gifted Register'. This is a folder maintained by staff that lists all gifted students in the school. The gifted register identifies all gifted students, their areas of talent and tracks their progress. Each gifted student has a portfolio that includes assessment data, information supplied by parents and teachers, work samples, details of extracurricular involvement and mentoring, details of awards and competitions, and observation notes. From this gifted register, it was found that there are eighteen male students that have been identified as being 'moderately' to 'extremely' gifted in English.

Teacher observations were also crucial in identifying potential participants for the study. Once I had the names of the gifted students in English, I was able to approach their English teachers in order to evaluate their current achievement levels and progress in English. Out of these eighteen, fourteen were considered to be currently 'underachieving' in English, or performing well below their potential. From this list of students, I was able to select the final ten participants for the study. Fortunately I was also able to obtain a range of students, with two gifted students at each year level. The final ten participants consisted of two students at year nine, two at year ten, two at year eleven, two at year twelve and two

at year thirteen. These ten participants also represented the range of underachievement, from those passing in English but who are achieving results below their potential, to those who are seriously underachieving in English and at risk of failure.

Once potential participants had been identified, the next step was to obtain ethical permission from the ten participants. All participants were approached in person and a written request was also posted to their home address. The purpose, methodology and aims of the study were explained to each participant to ensure fully informed consent. All ten students agreed to participate. Permission was also sought from the parents/whanau of the participant as well as their current (or most recent) English teacher. Due to the age of participants, if their parents/whanau did not agree to participate, the student would not be able to participate. Consent was gained from the families of all ten prospective participants. If participation was declined from the teachers of the students, the participant could still be interviewed, but no information could be derived from the teacher. All teachers who were approached consented to participate. Only six teachers were involved in this study, as some teachers currently teach more than one participant. One participant is no longer studying English. In this case, his year twelve English teacher agreed to participate.

3.4 Data Gathering

The first step of the research study was to obtain records for each of the participants in order to build a full profile of their current achievement. For each participant, previous school reports were collected. These school reports contain assessment results as well as comments from teachers across the curriculum. In English, a portfolio of work is collected

and maintained throughout the school year. For each participant, this portfolio was collected to obtain work samples and assessment results. Information from the gifted register was also collected for each participant. Information of use included details of awards and achievements, reports from previous schools and observational notes on behaviour, attendance and disciplinary problems. Records were photocopied, names were removed from all information and all original documents were returned to the staff member concerned.

At this school, all students are tested using formative tests at the beginning of each school year. These test results are recorded on the school's computer management system in order to track students' progress in the core areas. The first of these tests are the Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs). Students sit PATs in Mathematics and English at the beginning of each school year. In English, this test measures students' comprehension of written texts and their vocabulary. Students are given a raw score as well as a Stanine. This Stanine score is between one and nine, and indicates their ability level in comparison to national levels of achievement. In English, students are also tested using a Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading (STAR) test. This test measures their skills of comprehension, de-coding and analysis when faced with unfamiliar texts. This test also results in a Stanine score, from one to nine.

As a supplement to the PAT and STAR formative test results, English teachers undertake their own testing to ascertain reading ages, reading levels and vocabulary proficiency. In the first term of each school year, English teachers use tests that have been developed for the

department to provide them with more information. The first of these tests is a reading test. The student reads a passage of text and the English teacher monitors their reading proficiency. At the end of the reading, teachers can deduce how many mistakes the student has made and can therefore give them a percentage of accuracy. A graph has been created by the English department which also correlates the reading percentage to an actual reading age. In the first term, students are also tested with a test of vocabulary that has been developed by the English department. Students are asked to give the definition of a range of words and to use them in context. English teachers monitor the mistakes made and can give the student a measure of their vocabulary as a percentage. For this study, PAT and STAR Stanine scores were collected, as well as reading level percentages, vocabulary level percentages and reading age estimates as deduced by the English department.

Once reports, work samples, assessment results and formative test results had been collected, the next step was to interview the participant. All participants were asked to give an hour of their time to participate in the interview. Students were asked questions about their current achievement levels, behaviour and attitude at school and reasons for their underachievement. Students were also asked to talk about what they would like to do in English and what they would like their English teachers to know. Their responses were recorded on a Dictaphone then transcribed. The interview tapes were destroyed and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts of interviews.

English teachers of the participants were also interviewed. Teachers were asked to talk about the behaviour of the student, current achievement level, factors in their

underachievement, and their attitudes towards English. As with the interviews with participants, responses were recorded in a transcript and tapes were destroyed. The interviews with participants and their teachers took place at the school in an interview room.

Interviews with the parents/whanau of the participant were also conducted in order to gain an understanding of their underachievement from another point of view. Once written consent was gained from the family of the participant, the family was asked to nominate one person (or a group of people) to participate in the interview. All ten families chose to nominate only one person to be interviewed who could speak on behalf of the family. For most participants this was a mother or father. For one participant, it was their Koro (grandfather). Six parents chose to come into the school to be interviewed in person. The other four parents requested to be interviewed over the phone. In all cases, the interview was taped on a Dictaphone and transcribed.

In combination with their interview, each participant was asked to complete a written questionnaire that provided more information on their learning preferences and their attitude towards school. Questionnaires were posted home to all of the students. A postage-paid envelope was included so that students could return their questionnaires by post. This ensured their questionnaire was completed in privacy and was kept completely confidential. The questionnaire asked students to circle responses on a scale to demonstrate their level of agreement. However, almost all students added written comments to their questionnaire. Some students provided further feedback to their

answer, while other students provided examples to support their opinion. For many of the students, they also discussed their questionnaire in the interview. Without being prompted, many students discussed their responses and added further information for some of the questionnaire items.

In summary, a range of information was collected about each participant in order to build a full profile for each participant. For each participant, I had interview transcripts from themselves, their English teacher and a parent, work samples, formative test results, assessment results and responses to a questionnaire. This information was then collated, analysed and summarised in order to gain a full understanding of underachievement of male students in English.

3.5 Analysis of Data

Most of my data was qualitative data, including transcripts of interviews, observations of students, survey responses and questionnaires responses. I studied these data using thematic analysis. This involved comparing, contrasting and finding significant relationships between what the subjects said. I also drew parallels and contrasts between what the students said with what the literature says.

The display of these qualitative data includes a selection of quotations, selected examples of student work, and summaries of observations. My aim is to include as many quotations

from students as relevant, in order to truly reflect the experiences and opinions of the students.

The first step towards answering the research questions was to present a profile for each student. This profile details students' current achievement levels, attitude towards school, behaviour, and needs. The profile also included their parents' and teachers' beliefs, observations and concerns. The aim was to understand these students as fully as possible before beginning to draw any conclusions or findings.

The second step was to find parallels and similarities among the ten profiles in order to uncover common reasons for underachievement. Chapters two and three of this research report examine common causes for underachievement and the most common features among the ten participants' profiles.

Finally, conclusions have been drawn, focusing on causes of underachievement for these ten participants. This study does have limitations, especially considering the fact that only ten participants have been interviewed, all from one school. However, the purpose of this study was to build full profiles of these students in order to fully understand the factors in underachievement for each student. No attempt has been made to generalise to the entire population of gifted underachievers in New Zealand secondary schools.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

As this research study involves student participants, a full Human Ethics Application was undertaken and approved (MUHEC approval number 08/59). This is a sensitive study, as it involves young males under the age of eighteen who are seen to be underachieving in English. Therefore, fully informed consent from the parents/family was also crucial.

Ethical consideration was extremely important in this research study, as I was dealing with three students and their education. The following principles formed a strong basis for my ethical considerations.

- **Informed consent.** The ten student participants were fully informed about the intent of this research. Students needed to understand the purpose of this research is to examine their underachievement in English and to find ways in which to improve it. Full permission from the students and their parents was sought before I began my research.
- **Voluntary participation.** Students and their parents had complete control over their participation. I was not able to use random sampling methods to choose my subjects, as I was drawing from a limited pool of potential participants.
- **Right to withdraw.** The ten students and their families had the right to withdraw from the research study at any time.

- **Permission.** As this research took place within a school environment, full informed consent was gained from the Board of Trustees, the Senior Management team and the Head of the English department before I began my research.
- **Coercion.** No students were coerced into participating at any stage. In order for this research study to have maximum benefit, I required students to be completely willing to participate.
- **Deception.** From the very beginning of this study, students were informed about the purposes and objectives. It was important for the students to understand the whole reason for their participation in this research study. Students were completely informed about the phases of the intervention, the methods of data collection and the reporting of results.
- **Anonymity.** At no point was any identifying information used. Students were never referred to by name and all identifying information was removed. Names were removed from samples of work and interview transcripts. Students and their parents were guaranteed anonymity.
- **Privacy.** All measures were used to ensure students were never asked questions outside the scope of the research. In dealings with the students, the focus remained on improving the students' achievement in English.

- **Participant safety.** At the beginning of the research, participants were made aware of whom they needed to approach if they had concerns. Participants needed to be aware of the possible consequences of participation in this study. All efforts were made to ensure students were free from physical, psychological, emotional or cultural harm.
- **Researcher safety.** It was important to make sure I did not place myself in any dangerous positions. I remained in contact with my supervisors at all times.
- **Dissemination.** The students were fully informed about the length of the study and the presentation of results. Students were given an opportunity to view the full research report. From the beginning of the study, students were made aware of who will read this information and how it might be disseminated.

In addition to these ethical principles, this research study posed its own individual ethical concerns. This study raised possible issues about role conflict. As the researcher for this study, I am also currently working at the school in the role of Gifted and Talented Education Coordinator. Therefore I know many of these students in this role, as well as in my role of English teacher. In order to remove possible issues with role conflict, students were only selected for the study if I did not currently teach them. Another factor to reduce role conflict was the administration of the questionnaire. Questionnaires were posted to the homes of the student participants. Students could complete these in the privacy of their own homes and then return these to school by post. In this way, the responses of the

students remained completely confidential.

This research study does pose potential harm to participants through the framing of the research terminology of 'underachieving'. When discussing the research with participants and in consent letters, I emphasised the reasons for the project. Participants were made aware that their selection for this project is because they have been identified as being gifted in English and this makes them extremely important and special. Participants were also made aware that their underachievement is concerning and the aim of this project is to help them achieve to their potential. The emphasis of the project is assisting students to achieve. I explained to students that their underachievement results from a complexity of issues. Underachievement and its varying factors and components were discussed with student participants before beginning this study. Reinforcing these messages has helped reduce feelings of embarrassment or a sense of failure.

The research methodology also posed potential threat to the teachers of the students, as students have the potential to make derogatory remarks about their teachers in the interviews and questionnaires. However, this was carefully controlled in the research design and the conducting of interviews. Underachievement in gifted students is a complex issue with a number of interrelating contributing factors: the student's personal qualities and characteristics, such as motivation; the student's home environment and background; and the student's school experiences. This research design recognises the important contributing factor teachers play in a student's education. However, in composing the interview questions I have very carefully composed these so as not to ask any specific

questions about teachers. However, in cases that students made direct reference to a teacher/s in a derogatory manner, the data was not used in the thesis report and the student was asked in the interview to elaborate on the teacher behaviour (e.g. inflexibility, lack of choice), as opposed to the teacher personally.

Ethnicity was also an important ethical consideration in this research study. The school has a significant proportion of Maori students, and therefore adequate attention to the needs of Maori participants was essential to this study. The purpose of this research is to build a rich, full profile for each individual student to understand the reasons for their underachievement and the barriers to their achievement. The ethnicity of a participant may help to better understand the student and their beliefs/opinions/attitudes etc. It was important to record the ethnicity for each participant and to take this into account. No conclusions are being drawn about ethnicity, just individual conclusions for each individual student. I am not attempting to make any generalised conclusions, just individualised solutions for the individualised and diverse participants.

Each student was interviewed and sampled on an individual basis. Special provisions for Maori students were arranged as necessary. For Maori participants, I had the option of bringing in a Maori staff member. This person is fluent in Maori and has extensive experience in Maori protocol and culture. This support person was also present to advise me on cultural issues, sensitivities, practices etc. This person was also willing to play the role of translator if necessary.

My supervisors are experienced researchers who have experience working with Maori participants. They provided support and advice to me throughout the research project. I also made contact with a Massey University staff member who has extensive experience working with Maori students and participants. This staff member was also available to provide support and advice throughout this project.

When I approached the school for consent, the group of teachers responsible for the wellbeing of Maori students were also involved. Representatives from this group signed the consent letters and asked questions of me as needed. I reported to this group on a regular basis to update them on my progress. They were able to voice concerns or problems at any time.

Possible identification of participants was an important concern in this research study. Due to the researcher being based in this school, it is possible that the school could be identified. Therefore maintaining participant anonymity was crucial. Student names and identifying information were removed from all records, work samples and transcripts. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the study to protect the privacy of students. No identifying information has been provided. Similarly, parents and teachers of the students have remained anonymous throughout the study and not named at any point.

3.7 Benefits for Participants

There are many potential benefits for participants. Participants will be given a voice in this research. Historically, literature and research studies have not placed much importance on the opinions of the students. However, in this research study, participants will be given an opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns. These thoughts and opinions have played an important role in this research and the conclusions that are drawn.

This research has also given participants time to consider their achievements in English and their attitudes towards this subject. Taking the time to reflect may help change attitudes or beliefs. Now that the research has been completed, there are many benefits to participants. I have obtained an understanding of why they are underachieving and how they learn best. These conclusions will be used to better cater to the needs of these students. Teachers in the English department will be informed of possible strategies to curb the underachievement of these students.

A possible benefit for parents is that they will see how important the achievement of their child is, and that their underachievement is not something to be taken lightly. Parents will be given a voice in this research project. Their observations and opinions have been recorded and were an important consideration when drawing conclusions.

3.8 Conclusion

The purpose behind this research methodology is to examine underachievement among gifted male students in English. This methodology has been designed in order to create rich, full profiles for each student participant. The aim is to understand each student as fully as possible in order to understand the reasons for their underachievement in English. This methodology has been designed to focus on rich narratives that tell a story of underachievement. The methodology has been designed to give students a chance to 'tell their side of the story'. Wherever possible, quotes have been taken directly from students so that their voices can be heard. The study design allowed the students to speak openly and honestly about their needs, while being heard by educators. It is hoped that by understanding these students fully, educators are able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the causes of underachievement and what these students need to succeed. Therefore the study has been designed not to draw strong conclusions, but to allow these ten students' voices to be heard.

Chapter Four: Student Profiles

4.1 Introduction

Ten participants were selected for this research. These students were chosen because they have been identified as gifted in English, but are currently underachieving in this subject. Interviews were conducted with the student, their English teacher and one of their parents/family members to build a full profile of these students. Students completed a questionnaire (designed by Heacox, 1999) probing their attitude towards school. School reports, work samples, assessment results and formative test results were also examined to develop a profile for each student participant. The aim was to gain a full understanding of these students' abilities, attitudes, beliefs, opinions and needs. Furthermore, these profiles were developed in an attempt to understand why each of these unique students is currently underachieving in English, and what can be done to help them achieve their potential. Rather than finding similarities between students, these profiles confirmed that underachievement is diverse. These are a diverse and varied group of students with different challenges and problems. These ten participants provide educators with ten individualised sets of challenges. What follows are the profiles of ten individual students with unique needs. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the remaining sections to protect the anonymity of participants.

4.2 Phillip

Phillip is a 17 year old, year 13 student who has been acknowledged for his gifts in English throughout his schooling. Formative assessment results and previous achievements have led teachers to identify Phillip as a gifted student who has the potential to be among the top

achievers at his year level in English. Table 5 below illustrates Phillip’s aptitude for English in relation to his peer group.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 9
STAR (English)	Stanine 9
Comprehension	98%
Vocabulary	97%
Reading age	19+ (top score)

Table 5: Phillip’s Formative Assessment Results (2009)

Phillip has attained Stanine 9 PAT and STAR results throughout his five years of schooling. A classification of Stanine 9 places Phillip in the top five percent for his year level. In tests of his reading age designed by the English department (and detailed in the previous section), Phillip has achieved the top score of 19+ years. This suggests his reading level is at least two years above his chronological age. Due to the limitations of the test, it is possible his reading age is well above this level. English department tests of Phillip’s comprehension and vocabulary (also detailed in the previous section) suggest he is a confident reader, scoring 98% and 97% in these tests respectively. An examination of these formative assessment results demonstrates Phillip has the ability to perform well above that of his peers.

In conjunction with these formative test results, teachers cite awards as evidence of his giftedness in English. In years nine and ten, Phillip won the award for ‘Top in English’. He has also won several Writing and Speech competitions throughout the past five years. In

the interview, Phillip's English teacher cited essay writing, speech-making and analysis of texts as Phillip's particular skills in English. Phillip's teacher also commented that Phillip is able to write confidently to express perceptive and insightful ideas within his essays. Phillip has a sense of his own ability and his gifts in English:

"Yeah, I am gifted in English. I've always secretly known it, but I don't think many other people would believe it. In a way, I wish you could wear some kind of label that says 'gifted' so that teachers would stop treating you like a cabbage. That would be heaps easier – if teachers just knew I was gifted, then I wouldn't have to keep proving myself" (Interview, Phillip).

Phillip's achievement has taken a serious decline over the past three years. Teachers' comments in the interview and in Phillip's previous school reports indicate that Phillip always met deadlines in years nine and ten and completed work to a high standard. However, now that Phillip is a senior student, he rarely meets deadlines and fails to complete assessments. Phillip's current English teacher commented in an interview that Phillip does not complete any work in class and completes little or no homework. His English teacher also explained that Phillip's work is extremely perceptive and insightful but incomplete. This incomplete work has led to many 'Not submitted' or 'Not Achieved' grades on Phillip's record for the past three years. Despite his incredible talent for English, Phillip failed NCEA Level Two English last year and is repeating it again this year. He gained 'Excellence' for his Creative Writing and Speech internal assessments, but these are the only assessments he has completed in English for the past two years. Phillip's English teacher has serious concerns that he will fail NCEA Level Two again this year. This is concerning as,

according to interviews with Phillip and his parents, Phillip wants to go to University next year to study English. At this stage he does not have the credits required to gain entrance into University. Phillip's English teacher comments that he should be "flying through NCEA English" and perhaps also attempting Scholarship in English, but that he is currently achieving well below his potential. In an interview, Phillip's father commented:

"Phillip failed English last year and will probably fail English this year again. That's just not good enough. He is a gifted student and should be succeeding" (Interview, Phillip's dad).

Table 6 below summarises Phillip's assessment results in 2009 to date. The results do not match with expected achievement levels for a gifted student. Although Phillip may be passing in some subjects, he is achieving well below his potential and is therefore a gifted underachiever.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Not Achieved
Mathematics	Achieved
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Achieved
Geography	Achieved

Table 6: Phillip's Assessment Results (2009 to date).

In years nine and ten, Phillip maintained a grade point average equivalent to 'Excellence' across all of his subjects. These results have significantly decreased in the senior school. Phillip narrowly passed NCEA Level One with 84 credits, but his credits were mostly at the

'Achieved' level. Phillip has not yet achieved NCEA Level Two despite the fact that he is now in year 13. He still needs to gain 30 credits, including at least 5 more credits in English to pass NCEA Level Two. In response to these results, Phillip's father stated:

"Phillip is extremely talented in a range of subjects – English, Maths and Science. However, his results are shocking, absolutely shocking. I think he's lost his motivation. I hope he can hold on for another six months so he can get into Uni, but I'm not holding my breath"

(Interview, Phillip's dad).

When asked if he was proud of his results, Phillip responded:

"No way was I proud of my results. It's hard to believe, but English would have been my best subject. The stuff that I did hand in for English was all excellent, but there is so much stuff that I didn't finish. I'm really kinda angry with myself" (Interview, Phillip).

Phillip explained that English is his favourite subject:

"I love English. It just makes sense to me. I get to be myself and express my own ideas and opinions" (Interview, Phillip).

Phillip asserted that Maths and Science are the subjects he least enjoys; however, despite his dislike for these subjects, he is passing in both Maths and Science:

"It would have to be Maths and Science because all you do is learn someone else's ideas. Then you have to recall what you know in tests. That's not true learning, it's just"

regurgitating” (Interview, Phillip).

This suggests that Phillip is achieving in subjects he does not enjoy, yet cannot pass a subject for which he has a passion and talent. The disparity between Phillip’s comments and results suggest there are other factors preventing Phillip’s achievement in English.

According to Phillip, there are two major factors for his underachievement in English. The first of these is non-completion of work.

“If I do something I like to do my best. The reason I don’t complete work is because it’s rubbish...” (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Phillip).

The comment above suggests Phillip has great pride in his work, and is perhaps, evidence of perfectionism. Rather than handing in work that is incomplete or below his standards, Phillip would rather receive a ‘Not Achieved’ grade. This suggests the reason for his ‘Not Achieved’ and ‘Not Submitted’ grades is due to a conscious choice, rather than a struggle to complete work.

The second reason Phillip gave for his underachievement in English is the level of the work. Phillip suggested his teachers give him easy work as a reaction to the lack of work he completes.

“Cos my teachers think I’m dumb I only get easy work so I give up. If I got harder work I think I would be more into it. But it’s a catch-22 – I don’t do the work, so the teacher gives

me easy work which I don't do and so on. It's like the chicken and the egg, instead this is a never-ending cycle of cabbage work" (Interview, Phillip).

Phillip fails to become engaged in this work and often chooses not to complete this easy work as it is far below his capabilities. According to Phillip's English teacher, she will continue to give him easy work until he is able to complete the work to an acceptable standard. His teacher is reluctant to give him harder work until he can prove he can achieve at this level.

According to previous school reports, Phillip was outgoing and motivated in class in years nine and ten. Over the past three years, he has become more quiet and reserved in class. In interviews, his current English teacher commented he is quiet and withdrawn. Although he sometimes contributes to discussions and activities, he will only attempt work if it interests him. Phillip's English teacher has serious concerns over his state of mind, particularly when compared to his positive demeanour in the junior school. Phillip's father and English teacher both identified boredom and a lack of engagement as reasons for his underachievement.

"English is by far Phillip's best subject. He is extremely talented in all aspects of English, but he has failed the past two years. He just doesn't seem to enjoy it anymore. He used to love English in the junior school, particularly research reports and film studies, but now he can barely be bothered" (Interview, Phillip's dad).

Phillip also commented on his withdrawal in class in his written responses to the Heacox questionnaire:

"If the teacher asks me a question, I always pretend I don't know the answer. No one really cares. The teacher just expects that. I think they ask me questions just to make sure I'm actually listening" (Written response, Heacox questionnaire, Phillip).

According to his English teacher, Phillip has requested to study his own texts in English, but this is not possible in his current Level Two English class. Phillip's English teacher states that in order to study texts at the required depth to meet the standard, the whole class needs to study the same text. Phillip's father and English teacher both believe that if he had more interest in the work, he would be more engaged and perhaps achieve to a higher level.

"Thou hate Shakespeare.. It doesn't even make sense. Plus the storylines are so unbelievable. I don't know why we have to study something that was written hundreds of years ago. There is so much modern literature out there. Let us do something new and interesting...I really like analysing texts if they are interesting, but most of the time they don't have enough depth to them. That's when I get bored. I need something that's gonna challenge me and make me think..." (Interview, Phillip).

When asked if he would like his English teacher to know anything to help him achieve, Phillip stated:

"Let us choose our own texts to study. That way we will be more into it. Plus, we might find something to study that was written in the last 500 years (laughs)" (Interview, Phillip).

There seems to have been a dramatic decline in Phillip's achievement between the junior and senior school in English. Phillip's English teacher states that he used to enjoy working on independent projects in the junior school, which supports a comment made by his father:

"Phillip used to love working on his own independent projects. I could never stop him doing homework when he was doing one of those" (Interview, Phillip's dad).

His father has particular concerns about what he perceives as the constraints and demands of NCEA. According to Phillip's father, NCEA has also limited the ability for Phillip to learn about things that interest him and learn in a way that engages him.

"I have serious concerns about NCEA. It seems to place a lot of stress and pressure on the students. I would like NCEA to be more interesting and motivating for Phillip. He loved the junior school because it was so interesting and he had so much choice. I know it's not possible, but I would love for NCEA to be just like the junior school" (Interview, Phillip's dad).

Phillip's father also suggests that the NCEA credit system has been de-motivating for Phillip, preventing him from wanting to strive for Excellence. This comment is evidenced in Phillip having only gained 'Achieved' credits in NCEA Level One, despite his grade point average of 'Excellence' in years nine and ten.

Phillip also communicated great frustration in his interview and questionnaire, commenting several times on the lack of variety and choice in English. Phillip used the words “boring” and “repetitive” several times throughout his interview and questionnaire. The responses to the Heacox questionnaire repeatedly show Phillip wants more variety in his English lessons:

“Rather than writing all the time, we would watch movies, make movies, go outside, go into the community and do real-life learning” (Interview, Phillip).

When asked about his achievements this year, Phillip responded:

“I just feel really gay about school this year. I know I should be doing better, but I just can’t be bothered. It’s that chicken and egg thing again. To get better results I have to work hard, but I don’t want to work harder because I keep getting bad results” (Interview, Phillip).

Phillip confirms his teacher’s and father’s beliefs that he is underachieving in English:

“I never would have thought I was underachieving because I do pass the stuff that I hand in, but overall I am definitely underachieving. I should be getting Excellence for everything in English. It’s time to get focused and prove what I can do” (Interview, Phillip).

Phillip is a gifted English student who is underachieving within the NCEA system. The challenge is to find ways in which to encourage Phillip’s success in English while meeting the requirements for NCEA. There is a serious possibility that Phillip may not achieve the credits he needs for University entrance, despite his desire to study English at the tertiary level.

4.3 Matiu

Matiu is a 17 year old, year 13 student who has been on the school's 'Gifted Register' since year nine. From the beginning of high school, Matiu was identified by the school as having gifts and talents across a range of subjects, particularly English. Matiu's formative assessment results throughout the past five years illustrate the fact that he is at the top of his year level in English and is capable of achieving well beyond that of his peers. Table 7 below summarises Matiu's 2009 assessment results to date.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 9
STAR (English)	Stanine 8
Comprehension	96%
Vocabulary	95%
Reading age	18

Table 7: Matiu's Formative Assessment Results (2009)

Matiu has consistently gained Stanine 8 and 9 results for PAT and STAR tests throughout his five years at high school. This suggests he is in the top five to ten percent for his year level.

Matiu's English teacher commented that he often completes his PAT and STAR tests well before the rest of the class, suggesting these tests are perhaps too easy for him. These formative tests have a 'ceiling' on them which may not recognise those performing at the very top of their year level. In years nine to eleven, Matiu consistently gained full marks in the PAT English test. Matiu's comprehension and vocabulary test results have consistently been above 95% throughout the past five years. In years nine and ten, Matiu's vocabulary

was at 99%. According to his teacher and parents, Matiu has been very reluctant to read over the past three years which may be having an impact on his vocabulary development. Matiu's reading age was estimated at 18 in year nine, but has not changed since his movement through the high school.

Comments by teachers and parents in the interviews further demonstrate Matiu's giftedness. According to Matiu's English teacher, in years nine and ten he was awarded 'High Distinction' awards in the University of New South Wales English, Maths and Science tests. This award places Matiu in the top one percent of students nationally in each of these three subjects. Matiu was also awarded the prize for best all-round student in year nine in recognition of his consistent Excellence grades and contributions to the wider curricular life of the school. According to Matiu's mother, Matiu was a valued member of various sporting and cultural groups, including Kapa Haka, Rugby, Soccer, Hoe Waka and Debating. Matiu's mother commented that Matiu has been a prolific reader from an early age and had an extraordinary vocabulary from a young age. Matiu's English teacher supports these comments, stating that Matiu is familiar with a wide range of literature and is able to write fluently and confidently in essays. She also commented that Matiu is able to produce perceptive insights into texts, often well beyond what his peers are able to produce.

Matiu's achievement across all of his subjects has taken a serious decline in the past three years. According to Matiu's English teacher, he was a motivated, dedicated student in the junior school, but there have been drastic changes in his behaviour and attitude in the senior school. Matiu is now described as easily-distracted, un-motivated and disruptive in

class. In an interview, Matiu's English teacher explained that he appears anxious and depressed in class and will become angry if confronted or challenged. She has serious concerns about his state of mind. Matiu's mother has also witnessed this decline and comments that he is very anxious and depressed at home. She is concerned about possible substance abuse.

Matiu's academic achievement has suffered as a result of his changed attitude and behaviour. In years nine and ten, Matiu's English teacher stated his work was perceptive and insightful. However, Matiu's English teacher also commented that Matiu had a tendency to rush through his work, suggesting that even in years nine and ten Matiu was un-motivated, perhaps because the work was too easy. In years nine and ten, Matiu was gaining 'Merit' and 'Excellence' results across all of his core subjects. The greatest factor in Matiu's declining academic record is that he no longer completes work by the deadline. Matiu's English teacher believes this is because the work is too easy for Matiu, so he doesn't attempt it. Matiu's mother was very vocal about her frustration and disappointment with Matiu's academic achievement:

"I just don't understand it. Matiu has 'Not Achieved' grades all over his record. He is probably the most naturally intelligent person I know. How is that possible? I find it so frustrating. If only he tried!" (Interview, Phillip's mum).

Matiu's mother and English teacher both suggested that Matiu is not completing the work because it is too easy for him and he lacks the motivation to complete it. In year eleven, he was gaining 'Excellence' results for the work he had completed and 'Not Achieved' results

for the work he did not complete or submit. In years twelve and thirteen his achievement record is primarily 'Not Achieved' results, mainly as a consequence of incomplete work.

Table 8 below summarises Matiu's academic results in 2009 to date.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
Outdoor Education (Level 2)	Achieved
Hospitality (Level 2)	Not Achieved
Tourism (Level 2)	Not Achieved
Physical Education	Merit
Food Technology (Level 2)	Not Achieved

Table 8: Matiu's Assessment Results (2009 to date).

Despite the fact that Matiu has been identified as gifted in English, he has failed this subject for the past two years. In NCEA Level One English, Matiu only achieved two assessments – Creative Writing and Response to Extended Text. As this was not a satisfactory achievement to allow him to move on to NCEA Level Two, Matiu repeated NCEA Level One English in year 12. He did not complete any assessments throughout the whole year. He only has 53 credits towards NCEA Level One, despite being a year 13 student. This year he has decided to drop English, to the disappointment of his past English teachers and mother. His year 13 course consists of P.E (Level Three), Outdoor Education, Hospitality, Tourism and Food Technology (all at Level Two). These subjects will not allow Matiu to gain University Entrance or to achieve his literacy requirements for University.

Matiu states that English is his favourite subject:

"Definitely English. That's crazy cos I don't even do English anymore, but definitely English"

(Interview, Matiu).

In particular, Matiu commented he enjoyed Creative Writing in English and misses this now that he is no longer studying English. Matiu's mother explained that he used to love English, but this changed once Matiu moved in the senior school:

"Matiu loved English in the junior school but hates it now. Maybe it's because there's too much pressure? Maybe it's because there's nothing to keep him interested or motivated? I'm not sure, but it's really upsetting" (Interview, Matiu's mum).

Matiu acknowledges that one of the biggest contributors to his disappointing academic record is his inability to meet deadlines and complete work:

"Sometimes I have really good intentions of getting my assignments done but they just don't happen" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Matiu).

Matiu's comments in the interview and the Heacox questionnaire revealed that he struggles to monitor his own time and would prefer that his teachers or parents helped monitor his task completion to help keep him on track. When asked if he is disappointed with his results, Matiu stated:

"Every year I know my results aren't that great, but what's the point, really? Every year I promise myself I will do better, but every year I give up" (Matiu, interview).

Matiu's comments in the interview and questionnaire suggest that he is capable of achieving, but does not complete work by the deadline, so gains 'Not Achieved' results.

Matiu's responses in the Heacox questionnaire suggest that if he could complete work by the deadline, he would be achieving. This is supported by comments from his past English teachers and mother, who all believe Matiu would be achieving if he could complete tasks when required and meet deadlines. Matiu, his mother and his past English teachers all believe Matiu is underachieving in English. One of Matiu's English teachers believes he should be sitting Scholarship English this year, and the fact that he is yet to pass NCEA Level One English is proof of his underachievement.

As well as academic concerns, there are concerns for Matiu's overall well-being. According to Matiu's mother he was extensively involved in the extra-curricular life of the school in years nine and ten. Over the past three years he has made a drastic decline in extra-curricular involvement. When asked about his interests and hobbies in the interview, Matiu replied "sleeping". Matiu's mother is concerned that this withdrawal from activities may be having a serious impact on Matiu's attitude. Matiu's mother also believes this withdrawal may be contributing to the depression and anxiety he displays in class and at home. When questioned about extra-curricular involvement and trying new activities, Matiu commented:

"What's the point? I know what I'm good at and I stick to it" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Matiu).

Matiu's mother believes another factor contributing to Matiu's underachievement in English is the movement to NCEA and the demands this has placed on Matiu:

“NCEA is not for Matiu. He did really well as a junior student, but NCEA is too demanding. There’s no choice or freedom and it just doesn’t motivate Matiu. But I don’t really have a right to complain. NCEA is our country’s qualification. It is suiting the rest of New Zealand, so Matiu will just have to fit into the system” (Interview, Matiu).

Matiu’s mother continues this comment by stating that the structure of NCEA, particularly with its emphasis on credits, has been de-motivating for Matiu. She believes there is no motivation for Matiu to aim for ‘Excellence’ grades anymore. She is also concerned that Matiu is now able to ‘pick and choose’ his assessments, which is contributing to his lack of motivation:

“I think NCEA is the problem. Matiu only aims for Achieved, because that gets him the credits. There is no incentive to aim any higher. He also chooses which assessments he is going to sit. I don’t think this is good enough – every student should be required to sit every assessment. That is just breeding laziness” (Interview, Matiu’s mum).

When asked what would help Matiu to achieve, his responses were very negative. Matiu seems to have lost all interest in English:

“I don’t know. I don’t think there’s anything you can do to make English better. I gave up English this year cos I couldn’t stand it anymore” (Interview, Matiu).

When questioned further about factors that may help him to achieve, Matiu mentioned his teachers and their beliefs. Matiu believes his teachers think he is less capable than he is which is leading to easier work:

"I want my teachers to know I'm smart but at the same time I'm scared of them knowing because they might push me or embarrass me in front of my mates" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Matiu).

This seems to be a catch22 for Matiu; he wants his teachers to know he is more capable so that he can be challenged, but at the same time he is concerned about his peers' responses. Matiu's past English teachers believe he was very talented, but they were reluctant to provide Matiu with more challenging or interesting work until he was able to complete the work at an easier level.

Matiu's academic future is uncertain. According to his assessment results and teachers, it is very unlikely Matiu will be able to achieve NCEA Level One by the end of the year. He has not achieved his literacy credits at NCEA Levels One or Two, so he does not qualify for tertiary study. Matiu's mother is extremely concerned about Matiu's outlook on the future and re-iterates her concerns about possible substance abuse. When questioned about his future, Matiu states:

"I have no idea but the dole's looking good about now" (Matiu, interview).

4.4 Joe

Joe is one of the most talented students within the ten participants. Joe is a 16 year old, year 12 student who has been identified as being 'extremely gifted' in English by the school, particularly in English. After discussions between the parents and his teachers, Joe was tested by an Educational Psychologist. This testing included IQ testing and tests of written and verbal communication skills. The Educational Psychologist's findings stated that Joe is a gifted English student who has the potential to achieve well above those in his year level. Joe's formative test results reveal that Joe is sitting at the very top of his year level in English.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 9
STAR (English)	Stanine 9
Comprehension	98%
Vocabulary	98%
Reading age	19+ (top score)

Table 9: Joe's Formative Assessment Results (2009)

Joe's formative assessment results are consistently at the very top end of the scale.

Throughout his four years at the high school, Joe has consistently tested at a Stanine 9 level in PAT and STAR tests. There are concerns by his English teacher and father that these tests may not be revealing Joe's true potential as there is a 'ceiling effect'. Joe's comprehension and vocabulary test results are consistently above 97%. Joe is a prolific reader and writer

which has helped develop his talents in English.

Joe's passion and talent for English is evident beyond his formative test results. Joe has had several pieces of work published in local newspapers and has won national Creative Writing competitions. Joe has also been awarded 'High Distinction' certificates in the University of New South Wales English and Writing competitions. These are awarded to students who place in the top one percent of students nationwide. According to his mother and English teacher, Joe is currently writing a novel, which is already in excess of 100 pages. Joe's mother revealed that at home, he will stay up late most nights reading and writing:

"I've just always had this gut feeling that Joe was gifted. As a child he was reading earlier than any of the other children. Throughout school he has always done well, even without trying. At home he spends so much time reading and writing stories. What other teenage boy does that?" (Interview, Joe's mum).

In his interview, Joe's passion for English, and in particular Creative Writing, was evident:

"I love to write, so of course it would be English. No other subject gives you the opportunity to write – it's all formulas and label-the-diagram stuff...I love Creative Writing. That's my favourite. I think I will probably be an author one day. I just love being able to express myself and explore any topic that I choose. Creative Writing is like the one thing in the whole of NCEA that you can actually be creative and use your own brain" (Interview, Joe).

According to Joe’s English teacher, he is able to produce his own perceptive ideas in response to texts. His written work is described as “outstanding” and his essays are mature and express insightful ideas. Joe’s mother supports these comments, stating that Joe always puts thought and effort into his work, producing work “that only a genius would understand” (Interview, Joe’s mum). According to Joe’s English teacher, the work he produces is similar to that of a first-year University student in terms of quality and preparation. Joe’s talent for Creative Writing has been acknowledged in national Creative Writing competitions and school awards.

“Joe is an amazing writer. He writes stories, poems and is even writing his own novel”
(Interview, Joe’s mum).

Joe’s assessment results do not reflect his exceptional ability. There seems to be a great disparity between what Joe is capable of producing and the results he is achieving. Table 10 below summarises Joe’s assessment results in 2009 to date.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Achieved
Mathematics	Achieved
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Achieved
Social Studies	Not Achieved
Physical Education	Achieved

Table 10: Joe’s Assessment Results (2009 to date).

As the assessment results show, Joe is achieving, but not to the levels his potential promises. Joe gained NCEA Level One with 91 credits and NCEA Level Two with 84 credits (just above the 80 credits needed to pass). These results suggest that Joe is willing to do just enough to pass.

“Joe could definitely be achieving at a higher level. He is so talented in so many subjects, but his results don’t seem to reflect his talent. English is a particular concern. English is supposedly Joe’s best subject and he wants to be an author, but he is only gaining Achieved results” (Interview, Joe’s mum).

However, a closer examination of these results highlights discrepancies in his levels of achievement within English. Joe is gaining Excellence credits for some of the assessments, but ‘Not Achieved’ for approximately half of his assessments due to incomplete work or work that is not submitted. As Joe’s English teacher explains, his ‘Achieved’ average is a result of some assessments at the ‘Excellence’ level and some at the ‘Not Achieved’ level. Joe’s English teacher believes he is ‘picking and choosing’ which English assessments he is completing. An examination of his other assessment results reveals this may be Joe’s strategy across the curriculum.

“The work Joe does complete is absolutely exceptional, but unfortunately there is so much that he just doesn’t complete or doesn’t hand in. His ‘Not Achieved’ results are due to incomplete work, not a lack of ability. Joe is very selective about which work he completes” (Interview, Joe’s English teacher).

Joe is very open and honest about his assessment record. He acknowledges that his achievement has been hampered by incomplete work. Joe identifies his own hurdle in achievement: a lack of interest in the work.

"I got an Excellence for my film essay. I loved that film and I just had so much to write about it. I didn't pass anything else, not because I'm dumb, but because I couldn't be bothered. I just don't get poems about love. It's not my thing, so I'm not going to write about it. If teachers gave me more stuff I was interested in I reckon I could do really well" (Interview, Joe).

Joe explains in a frank manner that he does not complete work that is un-interesting or not enough of a challenge. According to Joe's English teacher, if Joe is interested in a piece of work, he becomes motivated and puts extraordinary amounts of effort into completing the work. If he is not interested in the work, he will not attempt the work or will leave it incomplete. In his interview, Joe expressed a strong belief that work could be more challenging and interesting, particularly with the selection of more modern texts. Joe believes he would be able to achieve much better results if the texts and topics were more interesting and challenging:

"I would like more challenging texts and lots more discussion. I think we could go a lot further with the texts than we do. Or maybe I could be allowed time to research texts on my own and develop more advanced ideas" (Interview, Joe).

In class, Joe's behaviour is described by his teacher as "quiet". According to Joe's English teacher, Joe either works independently to complete tasks, or sits quietly not completing any work. This makes it difficult to monitor Joe's work, as he remains quiet and appears to be working. Joe's mother states this has been a problem from an early age:

"In his school reports, it always says Joe is quiet and well-behaved. However, some of the time he's not working. I'm not sure what he does, but he sits there quietly and gets away with it. I try to warn his teachers to keep a close eye on him, but because he is quiet and no trouble, they seem to leave him alone" (Interview, Joe's mother).

In contrast to his quiet classroom behaviour, Joe's contributions to class discussions are outstanding. According to Joe's English teacher, he will contribute to all classroom discussions and will provide insightful and thoughtful comments. It appears that Joe enjoys discussing ideas. This is supported by Joe's comment in the Heacox questionnaire:

"I love class discussions. You get to discuss ideas in more depth and listen to other points of view. I like that time where we can just think and discuss" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Joe).

Joe demonstrates an accurate and honest understanding of his ability, achievements and potential. Joe is aware that he is a gifted student and very aware that his results should be much higher than they are. Joe's comments also suggest he truly wants to try harder to gain the results of which he is capable:

"I am passing English, but I could be achieving much better. It is kind of good to realise that. I deserve higher marks and I should push myself more" (Interview, Joe).

Joe can also articulate what he needs from his school and teachers in order to help him achieve to a higher level. In some subjects, Joe's teachers have asked Joe to lead groups in an attempt to engage and motivate Joe in the work. However, according to Joe this group work is particularly frustrating as the work is too easy and not enough of a challenge. Joe would prefer to spend class time extending and challenging himself, rather than reviewing material and content he has already mastered:

"I absolutely hate group work. Why do teachers insist on making us work in groups? I always end up doing all the work for the whole group but everyone gets the credit" (Interview, Joe).

Joe's solution would be to complete independent, challenging work that motivates him. In Joe's interview, he spoke passionately about his Biology Science Fair project. In class, if he is ahead with the work or frustrated with the level of the work, he is allowed to go and work independently on his Science Fair project. *"I really appreciate my teacher allowing me to do that" (Interview, Joe).* Joe commented several times throughout his interview that more interesting and challenging work would help him to achieve. Joe would like some monitoring and guidelines from teachers to help him stay on track:

"Give us choice with activities, but not too much. I hate it when teachers say 'what do you want to work on and how do you want to present it?'. That's too much choice. Maybe give

us some options. But make sure you monitor us, cos if it's a big project it's very likely we won't get it done" (Interview, Joe).

Joe has a passion and talent for learning and has the potential to achieve to his potential with some support from teachers. Joe is desperate for more choice and interest in his work, which may pose a challenge within NCEA assessments. He is an exceptionally talented student and is passing NCEA, but needs to be provided with more challenging material if he is to achieve to his potential.

4.5 Shaun

Shaun is a 16 year old, year 12 student who has been identified as 'extremely gifted' in English by previous schools and current staff members. At the insistence of his parents, Shaun has undergone psychological testing. Shaun has been tested using IQ tests that suggest he is extremely gifted, particularly in written and verbal communication skills.

Shaun's only area of giftedness appears to be English. Shaun has struggled in his other subjects throughout his schooling but has demonstrated an exceptional natural ability for English.

Shaun's formative test results highlight his aptitude for English. Throughout his four years at high school, Shaun has consistently gained Stanine 9 results for PAT and STAR English tests. In contrast, Shaun is currently Stanine 5 in Mathematics and Science. Shaun's

comprehension and vocabulary test results have remained consistently above 95% throughout his four years at school.

“Every test Shaun sits it shows the same thing – he is at the top end of the scale for his age. In all his PATs he always scores at the top end for his year level. When he sits those New South Wales English and Maths tests and he always gets himself a Distinction or High Distinction. If he tries in tests he always scores close to one hundred percent. Unfortunately he doesn’t try very often” (Interview, Shaun’s dad).

According to his English teacher and his father, Shaun is a prolific reader and writer and is well beyond the capabilities of his peers. This is demonstrated in his reading age, which is currently estimated at 19+ (the highest recording of the test). His current reading age is at least three to four years above that of his actual age. Table 11 below summarises Shaun’s formative test results for the current year.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 9
STAR (English)	Stanine 9
Comprehension	96%
Vocabulary	99%
Reading age	19+ (top score)

Table 11: Shaun’s Formative Assessment Results (2009)

Shaun's talent for English is easily evidenced in class discussions. According to his English teacher, Shaun's contributions to class discussions consistently reflect a perceptive and insightful understanding of texts, well beyond that of anyone of his year level. Shaun's English teacher states that he is able to express complex ideas confidently and maturely in discussions. Shaun's father expressed a fascination for the talent Shaun demonstrates in his work:

"I knew for sure that Shaun was gifted when I read one of his film essays in year ten. I couldn't believe he read that much into the film. He was able to express himself in such a mature and confident way. Even the teacher was blown away" (Interview, Shaun's dad).

Shaun has also excelled in debating competitions, participating in several winning debates in and out of school. Shaun's English teacher and father both discussed his sense of humour and witty remarks as further evidence of his giftedness. Shaun's English teacher explained that Shaun has a sense of humour that is mature and insightful and comparable to that of an adult. He also entertains the class with quick, witty comments. Shaun's expressed a belief that his sense of humour has always been a clue to his intelligence. Shaun's father said that Shaun was able to entertain adults from an early age and was always able to understand mature, adult jokes.

According to his father, Shaun has excelled outside of the classroom. He has participated in a wide range of sports during his four years at the high school. Shaun's father and teacher both agree that Shaun is outgoing, confident and popular among his peers.

Shaun is described by his English teacher as “coasting through” English. The work he completes is at a consistent ‘Excellence’ level; however, he often fails to complete work, gaining ‘Not Achieved’ results. This only seems to be the trend in English. In other subjects, Shaun hands in the majority of work. This may suggest that English is much easier for Shaun, so he believes he does not need to work as hard. Throughout high school, Shaun’s written work has been incomplete, messy and unorganised. According to Shaun’s English teacher, at times he can be extremely engaged and motivated and quickly completes tasks, but mostly work is rushed and/or incomplete. Table 12 below details Shaun’s assessment results in 2009 to date.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Not Achieved
Mathematics	Achieved
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Not Achieved
Social Studies	Achieved
Physical Education	Achieved

Table 2: Shaun’s Assessment Results (2009 to date).

The assessment results above are in direct contrast to Shaun’s formative test results. According to testing, Shaun has a natural gift and talent for English that places him at the top of his year level. However, Shaun is currently gaining ‘Not Achieved’ results in English. Formative testing has revealed that Shaun is Stanine 5 for Mathematics and Science, suggesting these subjects are more difficult for Shaun, yet Shaun is passing Mathematics. There are factors impeding Shaun’s achievement in English.

"I totally bombed in English and I don't even know why. It's my best subject. I guess I just got lazy and didn't give it my best" (Interview, Shaun).

Shaun appeared to be honest and realistic in the interview. When asked if he was underachieving in English, Shaun responded:

"To be honest, yeah I am. Everyone (including myself) thinks I'm doing OK because I'm passing, but I'm not doing anywhere near as well as I should be. This interview has given me a real wake-up call. It's not good enough" (Interview, Shaun).

However, Shaun expressed a strong desire to improve and succeed in English in the future. Shaun's greatest frustration is that he could be excelling in English, but he is not even passing. Shaun was confident that he was well ahead of those in his class, but struggled to convert this talent into actual grades. Shaun's father also expressed frustration at the disparity between Shaun's potential and results:

"What frustrates me is that Shaun is extremely talented in English, and yet his results are very average. There are kids that are far less talented than Shaun that are gaining much higher results than him. He doesn't need to try very hard to gain much higher results" (Interview, Shaun's dad).

When asked about underachievement, Shaun's English teacher believes he is "at serious risk" of underachieving in English. Shaun's teacher is pleased with the work he does produce (which is at 'Excellence' level), but is seriously concerned by the amount of work

that is being left incomplete or not submitted at all. Shaun's English teacher also expressed concern over the rushed nature of Shaun's work. This suggests the work is easy for Shaun, as he is able to rush through it at the end and still gain 'Excellence' grades.

Several reasons for underachievement were expressed in the interviews with Shaun, his father and his teacher. However, the interviews uncovered many differing points of view between Shaun and his English teacher. Shaun demonstrated an unwillingness to complete written work. Shaun believes he is good at producing ideas orally. Shaun's English teacher believed Shaun had a difficulty in writing to express ideas, however Shaun voiced a completely different point of view, in which he "cannot be bothered" writing down ideas:

"I'm real good when it comes to class discussions. I love discussing ideas, but when it comes to writing stuff down I just can't be bothered. I don't even have an English book" (Interview, Shaun).

Shaun also expressed dissatisfaction with copying from the board. Shaun's English teacher also commented on this, stating that Shaun was "lazy" in class and "couldn't be bothered". However, Shaun suggests he hates copying ideas because he does not like copying other people's ideas:

I hate copying from the board and I hate being told what to think. If I can think for myself I love it, but that's not often" (Interview, Shaun).

There is clearly a disparity between Shaun's opinions and beliefs and Shaun's English teacher's views of him as a student.

Another factor in Shaun's underachievement appears to be his lack of focus in the classroom. Shaun is described (by his English teacher) as being "distracted in class". Shaun's father also comments that Shaun's behaviour in class can be "off-track". Shaun also acknowledges his tendency to become distracted in class, particularly commenting on the "temptation" of the computers in the room. However, Shaun suggests his tendency to become distracted is a result of a lack of interest and motivation in the classroom:

"Why do we have to study the poetry of some old dead dude who wrote it like 500 years ago? Surely some poetry has been written since then? I hate doing stuff that has no relevance to me" (Interview, Shaun).

Shaun has a strong desire to study texts that are more modern, relevant and engaging. In his interview and questionnaire, Shaun expressed a strong preference for more variety and choice in English so that he could learn in more engaging ways:

"Maybe we could make websites with a different page for each thing we studied. That would be awesome. You could put on your own research, pictures and diagrams and even upload music. Imagine that! Or you could even make blogs. Now you're giving me ideas!" (Shaun).

Shaun's father supports this comment, suggesting Shaun would excel if he were to be given more independence, choice and variety. Shaun's father demonstrated an understanding of what his son needs in order to achieve. Shaun's father believes that what Shaun needs is in direct contrast to structures and regimes of our secondary schools.

"Ideally Shaun would arrive at school when he was ready, go to the classes he felt like and work at his own pace on his own topics. But I know this isn't realistic unless we homeschooled him...In an ideal world, I would like to see Shaun recognised for his talent and given more independence and freedom. I would like to see him choosing his own activities and learning at his own pace" (Interview, Shaun's dad).

The final factor impeding Shaun's achievement in English is his inability to meet deadlines. Shaun's English teacher was positive Shaun would achieve better results in English if there were no deadlines. According to Shaun's English teacher, when he is fully engaged and interested in a task, he often works slowly, perfecting his work. This means Shaun is not always able to meet deadlines resulting in 'Not Achieved' grades. According to Shaun's father and teacher, Shaun also needs time to "process" and think before he begins writing so that he can fully develop his ideas. Shaun himself expressed frustration over the need for deadlines:

"Don't always insist on deadlines. I will get stuff done if you just give me a bit more time" (Interview, Shaun).

Shaun is an extremely gifted English student but is underachieving in a subject that comes naturally to him. His inability to meet deadlines, lack of engagement and interest in tasks and unwillingness to produce written work has resulted in a record of “Not Achieved” results. Shaun’s father highlights his frustrations that Shaun is not excelling in a secondary school environment. Throughout the interview he appeared frustrated, confused and without answers:

“School is just not Shaun’s thing. He struggles to wake up in the morning and he would rather do anything than do homework. He will never achieve at school and I just don’t know what to do about that” (Shaun’s dad).

4.6 Brad

Brad is a 15 year old, year 11 student who is underachieving in English. Brad had been identified as gifted in English through formal assessments and psychological testing. Two years ago Brad underwent IQ testing by an Educational Psychologist at the insistence of his parents. The Psychologist came to the conclusion that Brad is well above his year group for average intelligence, and has a particular gift for English. Despite significant absences from school, his oral work reflects a perceptive understanding of the texts studied in class that is well beyond anything his peers are able to produce. Table 13 below highlights Brad’s capabilities in English.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 9
STAR (English)	Stanine 8
Comprehension	95%
Vocabulary	95%
Reading age	17

Table 13: Brad's Formative Assessment Results (2009)

Brad's PAT and STAR tests suggest he is Stanines 8 and 9, the highest levels possible for English. These results have consistently remained above Stanine 8 for the past three years. Brad's comprehension and vocabulary scores suggest he is in the top five percent for comprehension and vocabulary for his year level. In tests of his reading age, Brad scores 17 years, which suggests his current reading age is at least two years above that of his actual age. According to Brad's mother, this is a surprising result as Brad is a very reluctant reader.

Brad has only recently been identified as a gifted student, mostly as a result of psychological testing. At the request of his parents, Brad was sent to an educational psychologist who performed several tests to determine Brad's ability in English. The formal report states that Brad is a very gifted English student, but is performing well below his potential. Brad has completed very little class work during his three years at high school, which makes it difficult to ascertain his ability. According to school reports, his behaviour is also very disruptive which makes teachers unwilling to work with him. To date, the only evidence of Brad's giftedness is his formative assessment results and the psychological testing. There

are serious concerns by his parents and teachers that Brad has not yet produced any work or results that reflect his ability. Brad himself is aware that he is not demonstrating his talent for this subject:

“My teachers don’t know what I’m capable of. That’s not because they don’t care, it’s just because I’ve never shown them” (Interview, Brad).

Brad’s achievement record shows failure in all areas. According to his English teacher, Brad completes very little work in class. She commented that his book work is messy, unorganised and very incomplete. In his interview, Brad commented that he spends most of his lunchtimes in detentions trying to make up for work he has not completed. Table 14 below summarises Brad’s achievement record for the current year:

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Not Achieved
Mathematics	Not Achieved
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Not Achieved
Social Studies	Not Achieved
Physical Education	Not Achieved

Table 14: Brad’s Assessment Results (2009 to date).

This is the first year of NCEA for Brad and he has only achieved six credits across all subject areas. His teachers have serious concerns that he will not achieve NCEA Level One.

According to Brad's English teacher, he has not passed any assessments to date and he has now been withdrawn from the English external examination because of his inability to prove he can achieve. In the interview, Brad commented very openly on his attitude to class work:

"Sometimes I will hand in a piece of work that I know is not my best and the teacher wants me to do it better. Then I can't be bothered. As soon as the teacher puts on the pressure, that's when I'm outta here" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Brad).

Brad's mother appeared very frustrated at Brad's attitude towards schoolwork, stating:

"Brad can't be bothered with English. He sits in class and contributes now and then but he doesn't complete his work. It's so frustrating. He could do well if he just tried...Brad goes to school to eat his lunch. I truly believe that. I don't know what else to say – he just hates school" (Interview, Brad's mum).

When questioned about his achievement this year, Brad stated:

"English is supposed to be a cruise but I failed. What a joke! I could have done better but I just don't care enough...I could have done so much better. That's the story of my life" (Interview, Brad).

In class, Brad's behaviour is concerning to teachers. According to Brad's English teacher, he is easily distracted and highly disruptive of other students. He is unwilling to sit at a desk and complete work, and often leaves his desk to walk around the classroom or even to leave

the room altogether. Brad's English teacher also states that when he is challenged about his behaviour, Brad becomes aggressive and extremely disruptive. Brad often questions rules and challenges authority. Brad's mother is also concerned about her son's behaviour, stating he is "out of control" at home and she has difficulties keeping track of his movements. Brad's mother expressed concerns over possible alcohol and drug use.

Brad's attendance is also a concern and a major contributor to his underachievement. According to school records, Brad is currently only attending approximately two days a week. His English teacher believes this is not enough for Brad to achieve, despite his natural ability. Brad's mother expresses utter frustration at Brad's attendance, stating that she leaves for work before Brad in the morning and comes home to realise he never left for school that day. Brad's mother believes his poor attendance is due to his lack of motivation in school and his desire to move out into the workforce:

"To be honest, I think it is just because Brad is lazy, but I think it comes down to the fact that he's not motivated. He's decided he just wants to get out into the workforce and earn money. It's so hard even getting him to school. He can't see how doing well in English will help him" (Interview, Brad's mum).

Brad reinforces his mother's concerns by stating:

"I'm so bored! I can't wait for school to be finished so I can get out there, earn some money and do what I really want to do" (Interview, Brad).

Brad's attendance has become a concern as it is contributing to his poor behaviour.

According to Brad's English teacher, when he is in class he is so behind in the work that he is completely disengaged. Brad also uses his inattendance as an "excuse" for his incomplete work or assessments that he has not submitted. However, Brad shows a complete lack of motivation in English and is unwilling to attempt work.

One of the major factors in Brad's underachievement is his incomplete work. Brad fails to meet deadlines and often hands in incomplete work or no work at all.

"Yeah, my results kinda sucked. It's totally my own fault. I didn't hand in work. I have so many 'incomplete' grades on my record. That pretty much sums up my year, really – incomplete" (Interview, Brad).

Brad and his mother both believe the main reason for this is Brad's inability to meet deadlines.

"Brad fails to complete work and never meets deadlines. He has no one to blame but himself" (Interview, Brad's mum).

Brad states that he has trouble keeping on track and monitoring his own progress. In the Heacox questionnaire, his responses suggested meeting deadlines is his greatest weakness.

In his interview, Brad expressed a desire for someone to more closely monitor his work so that he does meet deadlines:

"I need checkpoints and deadlines" (Interview, Brad).

Brad's comments suggest that deadlines may be one of the major factors in his underachievement, although even Brad himself is unable to guarantee his own success if there were no deadlines:

"That's the worst thing about school – deadlines. If we didn't have deadlines I reckon I could do pretty well. On second thought, maybe not. I probably still wouldn't get any work handed in (laughs)" (Interview, Brad).

Brad, his mother and his English teacher all agree that Brad is seriously underachieving.

Brad's teacher expressed a sense of dismay and frustration at Brad's potential:

"I know all the results tell us Brad is a gifted student, but sometimes I find it very hard to believe. He has never produced an ounce of work that shows his potential" (Interview, Brad's English teacher).

Due to Brad's lack of work ethic and his poor behaviour in class, many teachers now refuse to teach Brad. According to Brad's English teacher, many staff members are very unwilling to believe the fact that Brad is a gifted student because his work and behaviour are so poor.

Brad and his mother both believe he has the potential to be achieving at a much higher level. However, they are both very honest when asked if Brad is currently underachieving:

“Absolutely. He is completely and utterly failing” (Interview, Brad’s mum).

“I’m failing everything, so yip, I’m pretty much underachieving” (Interview, Brad).

Brad believes he will not pass NCEA Level One and does express his disappointment at this fact. However, he seems excited and confident about the prospect of moving into full-time employment, as he believes school is a “waste of time” for him at the present.

Despite Brad’s disruptive behaviour and poor work ethic, his interview and questionnaire revealed an interest in English. He is even prepared to identify some topics that are enjoyable:

“What we do at the moment isn’t that bad, it’s just kinda boring. I would like to choose my own texts and my own Creative Writing topics. I think that would make me more motivated to actually do something” (Interview, Brad).

Brad communicated a positive attitude towards English throughout his interview and questionnaire, but simply explained “it’s not for me”. When questioned about what may help him to achieve in English, Brad supplied practical suggestions:

“Make it more interesting. Give us chances to talk, watch more films, maybe get some guests in. We could go on a trip – that would be awesome. I don’t know, just keep it interesting and different” (Interview, Brad).

Brad is an extremely talented English student who has been underachieving for several years. Brad demonstrates an interest and passion for English, but seems to have lost his motivation to achieve.

4.7 Wiremu

Wiremu is a 15 year old, year 11 Maori student with academic and behavioural issues. In contrast to his attitude and behaviour, Wiremu has been identified as a gifted English student through formative testing, work samples and teacher observations. Table 15 below demonstrates Wiremu's incredible ability in English.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 9
STAR (English)	Stanine 8
Comprehension	96%
Vocabulary	99%
Reading age	18

Table 15: Wiremu's Formative Assessment Results (2009)

Wiremu has consistently tested at a Stanine 8 and 9 level in English over the past three years. His comprehension and vocabulary scores have consistently been at 95% or above. In 2008, as a year ten student, Wiremu gained a 100% vocabulary score. Wiremu's mother and English teacher both remarked on his incredible use of vocabulary within writing and

conversations. Wiremu's reading age has been estimated at 18, three years above his actual age, despite being a reluctant reader both at school and at home.

The work Wiremu completes is of an exceptional standard, according to his English teacher. Wiremu's school reports and comments by his teachers suggest that his completed work is comparable to that of a year thirteen student. His written work reflects a perceptive and insightful understanding of texts. Wiremu is also able to express confident opinions within his writing and is able to express himself clearly and maturely. In interviews, Wiremu's mother and English teacher both comment on his exceptional talent for Creative Writing. Wiremu won a national Creative Writing competition for a short story in 2008 which was published in a national newspaper.

Wiremu's academic results do not match the talent he has for English. Table 16 below summarises Wiremu's results this year so far.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Not Achieved
Mathematics	Not Achieved
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Not Achieved
Social Studies	Not Achieved
Physical Education	Not Achieved

Table 16: Wiremu's Assessment Results (2009 to date).

This is Wiremu's first year of study towards NCEA. He has only gained eight credits to date. Comments on his school reports suggest that it will almost impossible for Wiremu to pass NCEA Level One from this point in the year. In English, he has only attempted two tasks. For one task (Creative Writing), Wiremu gained an 'Excellence'. He failed to meet the deadline for his other assessment and handed in a piece of research that was incomplete, so therefore received a 'Not Achieved' grade. Currently on Wiremu's achievement record, he has four 'Not Achieved' grades and one 'Excellence' grade for English. Wiremu's English teacher believes his lack of achievement is due to his behaviour, lack of attendance and inability to meet deadlines. Wiremu should be excelling in NCEA Level One English according to his English teacher. Wiremu's mother also expressed her distress over Wiremu's results in the interview:

"Wiremu's results are terrible. He won't even get NCEA Level One. He could be achieving in all of his subjects, particularly English" (Interview, Wiremu's mum).

When questioned about his results this year, Wiremu stated:

"I could have done better but I couldn't be bothered" (Interview, Wiremu).

However, Wiremu demonstrated a passion and excitement for English in his interview and questionnaire. Wiremu spoke of his love of English and the different assessments:

"English is da bomb (laughs). Nah, seriously, I look forward to English. I dread everything else... Last year we did this really cool modern poetry that was kinda dark and gory. That's cool. I don't mind doing poetry if it's actually interesting" (Interview, Wiremu).

This statement suggests disparity between Wiremu's love of English and his current achievement level. Wiremu's mother also spoke of her frustration about Wiremu's underachievement in English:

"I can't understand Wiremu. He loves English and it comes so easily to him, but he is failing. He only does the work he wants to do, and disrupts the class at other points. He gets kicked out of his English class so often that I can't keep track... If he could remain focused in class he would actually do really well" (Interview, Wiremu's mum).

Despite his poor achievement, Wiremu expressed a desire for his teachers to acknowledge his giftedness. Wiremu demonstrated a belief that with help and support from his teachers, he could achieve to his potential:

"My teachers think I'm a waste of space. Do I care? Yeah, actually I do, 'cos I reckon I could be pretty great with a bit of help... I reckon I know more than they think I know" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Wiremu).

School reports detail Wiremu's consistent poor behaviour. His behaviour has been extremely problematic, causing many teachers to refuse to teach Wiremu. His abusive treatment towards staff has resulted in many teachers becoming unwilling to provide him with individual support. Wiremu's behaviour in class is described as extremely disruptive and erratic. According to his English teacher and previous school reports, at times he can be focused and complete excellent work, however at other times he is un-manageable.

Reports document an inability to sit at a desk for more than five minutes, a tendency to

walk out of the room without permission and use of inappropriate language. Across all of his subjects, Wiremu has a tendency to only attempt the work he is interested in, and this has become difficult for teachers. A lot of the work he does complete is rushed, incomplete and unorganised. Wiremu's English teacher states:

"There are a lot of things that don't interest Wiremu and then he doesn't do the work. If Wiremu's not interested, watch out. He can disrupt an entire lesson" (Interview, Wiremu's English teacher).

Wiremu's behaviour has become problematic throughout the school, both inside and outside the classroom. Records of Wiremu's behaviour are extensive. Wiremu has been accused of stealing various times from students and staff members. He has also been verbally abusive to students and staff members on several occasions. In 2008 Wiremu was involved in physical abuse on another student. Wiremu has been caught smoking several times throughout his three years at high school. Staff members express concern about possible drug abuse, but as yet there is no evidence. Wiremu has been excluded from attendance four times in the past three years, mostly due to fighting and abuse of staff members. According to school reports, when Wiremu is confronted about his behaviour, he becomes extremely aggressive and physically violent. According to Wiremu's mother and English teacher, the next time Wiremu is involved in an incident, he will be called before the Board of Trustees and faces a very high chance of being excluded from this school. It is extremely troubling to see a gifted student facing possible expulsion.

"Wiremu is one of the worst students at the school. He has been caught smoking and fighting. He even swears at the teachers. He is skating on thin ice at the moment. I really

don't know why Wiremu is misbehaving. He has so much potential and we had so much hope for him" (Interview, Wiremu's mum).

Wiremu believes the greatest factor in his underachievement is a lack of independence and choice. Throughout the interview and questionnaire, Wiremu spoke of the creativity he tries to bring to his school work to make it more interesting. Wiremu spoke of choosing his own texts to study, presenting work in a slightly different way, or studying different topics to the rest of the class. Wiremu believes he is being penalised for his ingenuity:

"I will try to do it my own way but it has to meet the criteria. That really sux. Surely teachers should just be happy that it's done? Plus, I make it way more interesting" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Wiremu).

Wiremu also commented that he becomes frustrated when he is expected to regurgitate others' ideas rather than producing his own ideas. This also suggests a need for independence and choice within his school work:

"If I have to copy someone else's ideas then write into an essay, that's when I switch off. I wanna have my own ideas" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Wiremu).

Wiremu's English teacher also commented on Wiremu's willingness to be independent and creative in class. However, his English teacher believed this was in direct contrast to what NCEA demanded.

"I encourage Wiremu to learn in an independent way, but it still has to meet the NCEA criteria. Unfortunately most of the time the regulations are strict, and the whole class needs to do the same thing. Wiremu needs to learn that he cannot always do his own thing and sometimes needs to get on and do what the rest of the class are doing" (Interview, Wiremu's English teacher).

Wiremu's mother also comments on this need for Wiremu to have more independence and choice in English:

"Wiremu needs to be treated like an individual. He needs independence and freedom and not to be stuck inside all day. I know that's not possible in a class of 30 students" (Wiremu's mum).

However, Wiremu's mother recognises that what her son needs is difficult to achieve in large classes and under the requirements of NCEA. Wiremu's mother also seems reluctant for her son to have individual attention because of his poor behaviour and the way he has treated staff members.

"No, Wiremu's learning preferences are not being catered for, but I can't blame the school. Wiremu constantly pushes the boundaries with his behaviour so why would the school want to go out of their way for him? There need to be rules and I understand that" (Interview, Wiremu's mum).

When questioned about what could help Wiremu to achieve, he talked enthusiastically about independent projects, choice, variety and challenge. Wiremu also talked excitedly about the prospect of individual research projects, or working on computers:

“Independent projects, definitely...(and) more time to work on the computers. There’s too much writing in English. It’s way too boring” (Interview, Wiremu).

Wiremu also expressed a realistic understanding that his behaviour and poor work ethic means teachers are unwilling to provide him with choice and independence.

The interviews with Wiremu, his English teacher and mother were largely filled with despair, particularly over the fact that an incredibly gifted student could potentially be expelled from school within a few months without achieving NCEA Level One. There seemed frustration and disappointment from all sides that Wiremu could not achieve to the level of which he is capable. Most compelling is Wiremu’s mother’s honesty about her sadness and disappointment:

“It breaks my heart that Wiremu is not achieving. He is the brightest person in our family by far and we all had such high hopes for him, but he just keeps getting into trouble. I know he is going to be kicked out of school very shortly and then what? He will end up in some dead-end job or getting caught up in crime. It really breaks my heart. He has an amazing talent for English and could end up at University but I just know he won’t make it” (Interview, Wiremu’s mum).

Note: Several weeks after this research was conducted, Wiremu was involved in another fight which resulted in him being called before the Board of Trustees. He was expelled from school. He ran away from home and has moved to another area in New Zealand. At the time of the writing of this report, Wiremu’s mother has no contact with her son.

4.8 Jordan

Jordan is a 14 year old, year 10 Maori student who is the highest achiever of the ten participants. Jordan has been identified as gifted in several subjects – English, Science, Maori and Sports. However, it is believed by his teachers and family that he is currently achieving well below his potential in many subjects, particularly English. Table 17 below details his current formative test results.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 8
STAR (English)	Stanine 8
Comprehension	92%
Vocabulary	95%
Reading age	19+ (top score)

Table 17: Jordan’s Formative Assessment Results (2009)

Jordan’s formative test results indicate that while he is not the most talented of the ten

participants, his results place him in the top ten percent of students for his year level nationally. Jordan's English teacher suspects that his level of ability in English may be much higher than suggested by these results. His English teacher states that Jordan often rushes through his PAT and STAR tests as he finds them so easy. Similarly, he rushes through comprehension tests because they are "boring", which suggests he may be making silly mistakes. Therefore it is very likely that Jordan's formative test results are much higher than what is indicated in the above table, but more accurate and individual testing may be needed to prove this. Jordan's reading age has been estimated at 19+ years (the highest possible score). Therefore Jordan's reading age is at least four years above his actual age. Jordan currently has the highest reading age for his year level in the school.

In the interviews much evidence was provided by his family and English teacher to support the belief that Jordan is a gifted student. Jordan's Koro (Grandfather) and English teacher both commented on his exceptional reading ability.

"Jordan has always been a reader. When he was seven and eight he used to stay up late at night to read. He was getting books from the adult section of the library when he was eleven and twelve. Unfortunately sports have grabbed his attention and he doesn't read as much lately, but he can still read very complex novels" (Interview, Jordan's Koro).

Jordan's English teacher commented that he is a prolific reader with a vast knowledge of literature. Jordan's teacher was initially surprised by the list of books Jordan stated he had read, but he quickly demonstrated a convincing understanding of each of them. His English

teacher also commented that he is able to read texts quickly, producing perceptive and insightful ideas.

“Jordan is a very fast reader. At first I was concerned about his level of comprehension, but I quickly learned he had gained a perceptive understanding of everything he had read”

(Interview, Jordan’s English teacher).

According to Jordan’s English teacher, his completed written work is exceptional. Jordan is able to write confidently to produce mature and insightful ideas. At year ten, Jordan would be expected to be working at Level 5 of the New Zealand curriculum. However, some pieces of written work that Jordan has completed have been assessed at Level 7 of the Curriculum.

Jordan, his English teacher and Koro all agree that Jordan is a gifted student.

“I guess I do have special talents in English. I find it way easier than other people and I always get the top marks in PAT and STAR tests. It’s not something I have had to work hard

at...it just comes easily” (Interview, Jordan).

“I know Jordan is gifted. And I know that may sound arrogant and every parent probably says the same thing, but I just know it to be true. He knows things no other kid his age knows. He can get Excellence grades without even trying. And you should see him read – he

can read a whole novel in a night. He has been granted a special gift, and I really hope he uses it wisely” (Interview, Jordan’s Koro).

Although Jordan is currently achieving in year ten, his Koro and English teacher believe his results are disappointing when compared to his potential. Jordan's current achievement record is at the 'Achieved' and 'Merit' level. Jordan's 2009 assessment results are summarised in Table 18 below.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Achieved
Mathematics	Achieved
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Merit
Social Studies	Achieved
Physical Education	Merit

Table 18: Jordan's Assessment Results (2009 to date).

The most reported reason for the disparity between Jordan's achievement levels and his potential is a tendency to rush through work. According to his English teacher, Jordan will often rush through work and finish it in a third of the time that it takes the rest of the class. Jordan's English teacher believes the work is easy, un-motivating and boring for Jordan, so he rushes through it just to get it finished as quickly as possible. She continues to state that Jordan completes almost all of his work and meets all deadlines, but his work is rushed and below his capabilities. She believes that Jordan shows little motivation to improve his work or to aim for higher results. Jordan's grandfather agrees with the statements made by Jordan's English teacher, commenting that Jordan could be achieving at a higher level.

“Looking at his achievement record, it looks like Jordan is doing OK, but I know better. I know he is capable of much better results. So therefore, yes, he is underachieving”
(Interview, Jordan’s Koro).

When questioned about his attitude towards school work, Jordan states that he feels bored and un-motivated by the work and so rushes through the activities to get them done quickly. According to Jordan, one of the benefits of finishing work early is that he can have free time. Jordan’s English report states that Jordan is developing a tendency to wait until the last minute to start work, and then he rushes through it to get it completed in time. Jordan talked about this in his interview, stating that he is given extra work in English if he finishes early. To avoid this extra work, Jordan seems to have developed a tendency to wait until the last minute to complete work. It seems that the teacher’s intentions to keep Jordan occupied and extended may have caused Jordan to make a conscious effort to avoid extra work. Jordan was adamant that extra work was not a motivating tool in English:

“If we finish early PLEASE don’t give us more work” (Interview, Jordan).

Jordan is a popular, outgoing student who is heavily involved in extracurricular activities. Jordan’s Koro states he has been a valued member of Rugby, Kapa Haka, Debating, Hockey and Athletics teams. The interviews highlighted concerns that these extracurricular activities may be taking priority over academic studies in Jordan’s life. Jordan’s English teacher believes that Jordan is achieving due to strong pressure from his family. She comments that Jordan’s family are extremely supportive of Jordan’s studies and keep in

regular contact with the school. There are also severe consequences if Jordan does not keep up with the work. However, Jordan's English teacher believes Jordan may be passing merely to keep his family happy. She comments that he is not personally interested or motivated in English. Jordan's English teacher believes Jordan's true passion is sports and cultural activities, and this is where he would prefer to put his efforts.

"Jordan's family are incredibly supportive which makes my job a lot easier. But I'm afraid Jordan may only be working to keep his family happy. The only thing he truly seems to care about is his extra-curricular activities. Jordan is most happy on the sports field. He does not seem interested or motivated by English at all" (Interview, Jordan's English teacher).

The support from Jordan's family is helping to keep Jordan on track and achieve in all of his subjects. However, Jordan's lack of personal investment and motivation suggests this may not be enough to keep him motivated throughout high school. The obvious disparity between potential and achievement levels may also be a result of Jordan's lack of internal motivation.

Jordan's behaviour in class is described as "adequate", "acceptable" and "fairly good" by his English teacher and in his school reports. If Jordan is working on a task, he is described as being quiet, focused and has the ability to work independently without supervision. If Jordan has finished a task or feels un-motivated by the work, he can be distracted and has a tendency to find things to occupy his attention. His school reports mentioned that Jordan will often use his cell phone in class, tries to eat in class and tries to play games on the computers. In the interview, Jordan openly discussed his tendency to become distracted:

“There are too many distractions! Particularly the computers in the room. It is so easy to play Tetris when your teacher thinks you are writing an essay” (Interview, Jordan).

Jordan’s Koro expressed disappointment at Jordan’s behaviour:

“Jordan’s behaviour is disappointing. If he has nothing to do, he will get on the computer and play games. I did not bring up my mokopuna this way. If he has finished, he should wait quietly for the next instructions” (Interview, Jordan’s Koro).

Jordan’s tendency to become distracted seems to stem from a lack of challenge. If given interesting or motivating work, Jordan works well in class. If Jordan has finished his work or feels a lack of challenge, he will find other things to occupy his time. At year ten his behaviour is not problematic.

In class discussions and group work, Jordan is described as “outstanding”. According to his English teacher, he willingly participates in all class activities and discussions, often bringing perceptive ideas to class discussions or to his group work. In group work, Jordan will often take a leadership role and pushes his group to achieve. Jordan’s Koro believes more oral work, group work and leadership opportunities would encourage Jordan to achieve to a higher level:

“Jordan learns best through talk and discussion. That’s how he always taught him as a young boy”

“I would like Jordan to be given more of a leadership role at school. He could teach the

others or lead the class. I think if he was given more respect and leadership opportunities he may rise to the challenge” (Interview, Jordan’s Koro).

At first examination of Jordan’s assessment results to date, it may appear that Jordan is achieving to an acceptable level. However, Jordan’s teacher believes he should be achieving all pieces of work at Level 7 of the Curriculum, and should at least be achieving Excellence for his assessments. When questioned about underachievement, Jordan and his Koro both believed he was achieving well below his potential:

Education is very important to our family, but Jordan does not respect that...Jordan thinks he can cruise through this year without really trying. That’s the problem – it comes so easily to Jordan. He needs to be challenged. If teachers don’t challenge him he just switches off and doesn’t even try. Getting Achieved is not good enough” (Interview, Jordan’s Koro).

“Of course I could have done better. I was slack as...I did really well in the things I tried in, like Creative Writing, but I failed everything else that I couldn’t be bothered doing” (Interview, Jordan).

When asked whether he was enjoying this year at school, Jordan replied:

“Nah, not really, aye. School this year is just not my thing. It’s really boring and I’m not doing as well as I should be”. (Interview, Jordan).

Jordan seemed disappointed in his own results and there was a sense of mismatch between what the school was offering and what he needed to achieve:

"I feel stink because I can see my teachers do care and they try really hard. I don't really know what the answer is. I know I would do better work if it was more 'my thing'. But I don't know what 'my thing' is and I don't think the teachers know either" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Jordan).

When asked about what changes he would like to see in English to help him succeed, Jordan was able to provide practical suggestions for teachers. Jordan's comments reflected a desire for variety, choice and engaging activities. Jordan also suggested assessments in written form are not necessarily the best way to assess knowledge. Jordan believed that if he could present his understandings in visual or verbal ways, he may be able to achieve to a higher level. Jordan seemed aware of his strengths as a speaker and leader and would benefit from assessments in these areas.

"I love talking about stuff and discussing topics. Debating is also really fun...Assessments wouldn't always be essays. Essays really aren't my thing, so I would want to show I know the stuff but just in a different way, like in a static image or a powerpoint" (Interview, Jordan).

Although Jordan is currently achieving at an acceptable level, his assessment record does not match his ability in this subject. Jordan is capable of excelling, but only seems willing to do just enough to achieve.

4.9 Max

Max is a 14 year old, year 10 student who has only recently been identified as a gifted English student. Max has gained Achieved results throughout years nine and ten, and until his formative test results were closely analysed earlier this year, it was believed Max was a mediocre student. However, several staff members and Max's parents now believe Max is a gifted student, particularly in English. Table 19 below details Max's formative test results for 2009.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 8
STAR (English)	Stanine 8
Comprehension	97%
Vocabulary	94%
Reading age	15

Table 19: Max's Formative Assessment Results (2009)

Max's formative test results place him in the top ten percent of students nationally for his year level. Most importantly, his comprehension test result places Max at the top of his year level for this school and in the top two percent nationally. Max's reading age has been estimated at 15 years which is only one year above his actual age. Max's mother and teacher agree that this reading age is a direct result of Max's reluctance to read.

Max's English teacher believes he has been "hiding" his abilities and "cruising" in English for some time. It was only three months ago that the school identified Max as a gifted student. Prior to this, it was believed Max was a mediocre student who was only capable of Achieved results.

"Max is the kid of student who easily goes un-noticed. He was passing, but there was nothing outstanding about him. Then suddenly, he got these extraordinary formative test results which made us look at him twice. It turns out, we may have a very gifted English student on our hands" (Interview, Max's English teacher).

To support the school's beliefs, the family has recently organised professional testing. Max was tested by an Educational Psychologist who confirmed that Max is a gifted student with a particular talent in English. The report states that Max has a high IQ, expresses mature ideas and is capable of higher order thinking.

After being identified as a gifted student, a staff member has been working closely with Max to foster his talents and encourage his extra-curricular involvement. Max recently sat the New South Wales Writing competition for the first time. Max received a 'High Distinction' grade and was placed in the top one percent nationally for all entrants. This was a surprise to Max's English teacher, his mother and especially to Max himself:

"I couldn't believe it. High Distinction! I didn't even want to sit the test. Turns out it was really easy and I totally aced it" (Interview, Max).

Max has also had several pieces of Creative Writing and opinion-based writing published in local and national newspapers in recent months. Max has entered three Short Story competitions and is awaiting results. Max's English teacher believes his writing is mature, insightful and engaging.

Max's English teacher stated he now strongly believed Max was a gifted English student. Max's English teacher believes Max has demonstrated abilities that place him well above his peers. His teacher also believes his formative test results cannot be "fluked" and are a true test of Max's potential in English. Max's mother was somewhat surprised by the 'gifted' title, but states that she knew he was different from an early age.

"I've always suspected that Max was much brighter than we thought. When he was younger, he always used to ask really interesting questions. He also started reading before the other kids. I'm kinda surprised that he is gifted, because he's not really doing that well in school, but I suspect he has the potential to be gifted" (Interview, Max's mum).

Max himself shows a belief in his own giftedness:

"I can write and I know not many people can. Like, I can write stories and pieces of writing that are published in the newspaper. I can't even tell you how many times I've had stuff published. I guess that makes me talented" (Interview, Max).

Max's responses suggest he has kept his giftedness 'hidden' from his parents and teachers due to a fear of his friends finding out. Max also suggests there are negative connotations and stereotypes associated with being intelligent.

"I don't want my mates knowing I actually know stuff. That's shame. No one wants to be a nerd" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Max).

Max's giftedness was perhaps missed by staff members because his results are those of an 'average' year ten student. Table 20 below summarises Max's school achievement levels to date.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Achieved
Mathematics	Not Achieved
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Achieved
Social Studies	Not Achieved
Physical Education	Excellence

Table 20: Max's Assessment Results (2009 to date).

Max's school reports comment on his assessment results, saying that he is capable of higher results but is achieving to a pleasing level. Physical Education is Max's most successful subject and comments on his report suggest he is a positive, motivated and enthusiastic P.E. student. Max's English teacher states his English results are 'satisfactory' but this is perhaps

why he was not identified as a gifted student. His teacher states that Max sometimes completes work to an 'Excellence' level, but rushes through other work, which results in an average of 'Achieved' results. Max suggests he is disappointed with his English results:

"I probably should have aced English, but instead I ended up with Not Achieved and Achieved marks all through my results summary". (Interview, Max).

Max's comment suggests he is aware that he is capable of much higher results in English but there is something preventing this achievement.

When asked whether he is underachieving in English, Max and his mother both agree that he is. Max's mum shows concern and frustration over his underachievement.

"He is passing and his results are OK. However if you take into account the fact that he is gifted, he is definitely underachieving. He should be getting Excellences, shouldn't he? I would say this is very concerning. Why is he not getting those Excellences?" (Interview, Max's mum).

Max and his mother believe the greatest reason for the disparity between his potential and his assessment results is a lack of interest. Both Max and his mother suggest Max's true interest and passion is on the sports field and outside in the 'real world'. Their comments suggest school has no relevance or motivation for Max.

“Max is an extremely bright student, but his results aren’t that flash. I can’t really blame him – school’s just not his thing. He would be much happier out on the sports field or in a practical job...Max will be great once he’s out in the workforce. Unfortunately we just need to survive the next three years of school” (Interview, Max’s mum).

“English is OK I guess, but I don’t look forward to it or anything. I love sports. If I could, I would play sports all day. I also can’t wait to get a job. I can’t really be bothered with school work and homework – I just wanna get a job” (Interview, Max).

Max’s behaviour and attitude in class is described as “satisfactory” in school reports and in the interview with his English teacher. Max’s English teacher states that he works quickly in class and shows some understanding, but is unwilling to put more effort into his work. He describes Max as an outgoing student who always participates in class discussions although he likes to “pretend” he is much less intelligent than he really is. Max’s English teacher believes there are two major factors preventing his success in English: pressure from his peer group to fit in; and a motivation and a passion to play sports. Max’s English teacher believes it is unfortunate that English has become one of the lowest priorities for Max, but he is achieving and behaving to a satisfactory level.

“I wouldn’t say I was badly behaved in English. I just don’t do any work. But I make a real effort not to be disruptive” (Interview, Max).

Max believes the reason for his underachievement is a lack of interest. According to Max, he is only motivated to complete something to a high standard if he is interested in the work.

“Sometimes I like analysing texts, but only if the texts are interesting or challenging...I think it’s because I wanna work hard at the stuff I enjoy. When I put in the effort I usually get an Excellence. If I don’t try I end up with a Not Achieved. It all comes down to what I feel like doing” (Interview, Max).

Max re-iterates that interest is an important factor in English when questioned about what could help him to achieve. Max spoke animatedly about variety, choice, and choosing something that interests him. Max strongly believes that having something interesting and motivating to work on would help him succeed.

One of my teachers gave me this activity sheet and I could pick my own activities. That was great because I did lots of visual activities which helped me practice my art skills. Anything that gives you a bit of choice is cool” (Interview, Max).

Max’s mother also agrees that his underachievement is largely due to his lack of interest and motivation. She believes English is a low priority for Max as he does not find it interesting.

“Max’s attitude towards English is really poor. He loves English and is exceptionally talented, but he does not complete his work. I’m not sure why this is. Maybe because he doesn’t see the relevance or doesn’t find it interesting” (Interview, Max’s mum).

Another factor in Max's underachievement seems to be his tendency to rush through work and his inability to meet deadlines. Max's English teacher states that he completes most of the work, but it is often rushed and well below his capabilities, gaining mostly Achieved results. His English teacher goes on to say that Max will complete homework if he is asked, but shows no personal interest or motivation to complete this work. According to Max's English teacher, he has no personal investment in English and it is a very low priority to him. His teacher believes this is extremely disappointing, especially considering his potential in English.

Max's mother believes the reason Max rushes through his work and puts no effort into it is because it holds no interest or importance to him. She believes Max needs variety, independence and a chance to learn outside, as being outside is the one thing Max is passionate about.

"Max needs to be outdoors. He doesn't deal with being cooped up inside all day. Take him out on the field and let him learn outside...In English, there is so much that Max can do without even trying. He needs a challenge. He also needs variety. Writing essays every day would bore anyone" (Interview, Max's mum).

Max believes the reason he has incomplete work is because he struggles to meet deadlines. Max states that he has intentions to complete his work and meet deadlines, but other things often grab his attention away from his schoolwork.

"I just forget to hand stuff in. I know that sounds pathetic, but I do. I promise my teacher I will finish it at home, but I end up going out to play sports instead. Sometimes I honestly do finish my work but I leave it at home or just forget to hand it in" (Interview, Max).

This comment suggests English is a low priority to Max, supporting the comments made by his mother.

When asked what could make English more interesting for Max and more of a priority, Max refers again to choice, variety and English.

"What we want is interesting work, not just more work. I don't think all of my teachers get that" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Max).

"Give us choice in what we do and independence. I love choosing my own activities" (Interview, Max).

Max goes on further to suggest independent projects would help to keep him interested and motivated in English. Max also suggests he would like more guidance and deadlines from teachers to keep him on track. Max's comments show he would like independence in his activities but more behavioural and progress monitoring from teachers.

"Independent projects which allowed you to pick your topic and choose how you presented it. I might need some guidelines and criteria though, otherwise I will get carried away" (Interview, Max).

Max is a student who has remained ‘undercover’ as a gifted student for some time. He may have been underachieving for a significant amount of time, and may have been left unchallenged because his talents were not identified. Max seems to demonstrate a lack of interest and motivation in English, and this subject is often his last priority.

4.10 Jack

Jack is a 13 year old, year nine student who has been identified as ‘extremely gifted’ by his school. Tests and formal assessments have suggested Jack is at the top one percent on his year level in English. Table 21 below demonstrates Jack’s formative assessment results to date.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 9
STAR (English)	Stanine 9
Comprehension	99%
Vocabulary	99%
Reading age	19+ (top score)

Table 21: Jack’s Formative Assessment Results (2009)

In PAT and STAR English tests, Jack has been assessed to be a Stanine 9, the highest possible score. Jack’s reading age has been predicted to be 19-plus, again a score that places him at

the top of the scale. This suggests that Jack's reading age is at least six years above his actual age. Tests of Jack's comprehension and vocabulary give him a score of 99%. Jack's English teacher suggests "it is almost impossible" to gain a score of 100% in these tests. There are concerns from his parents and his English teacher that there may be a 'ceiling effect' on these results for Jack. He is achieving the top score in these various formative tests, but his actual ability may be higher than is able to be measured on these tests. These test results place Jack at the top of year nine for his school and the top one percent of students nationally. Jack is an exceptionally talented English student.

Evidence of Jack's giftedness goes well beyond his formative test results. According to his parents and English teacher, Jack is a prolific reader. Jack's dad stated that Jack reads for at least an hour each day, and it is often hard to get him to put a book down to go to bed. Jack's English teacher stated the books he was reading were well beyond what those of his peer group were reading. In his interview, Jack listed *Frankenstein*, *Catcher in the Rye* and *Great Expectations* as some of the books he has been reading lately. These are very mature, highly complex books usually aimed at senior students.

Jack has also won several awards in recognition of his talents. Jack's Intermediate transcripts and records were examined for more details of his abilities. At Intermediate school, Jack was the top of year seven and eight, and won the award for 'Top in English' both of these years. Jack also won the Creative Writing prize in both years seven and eight. In year eight, Jack gained the top mark in New Zealand for the University of New South Wales (UNSW) English competition. This year Jack has gained a High Distinction in both the

UNSW English and Writing competitions. These awards are recognition of those students that are placed within the top one percent of entrants nation-wide. Jack has also been part of a debating team that won the regional competition, and his Future Problem Solving team has been offered a place in the national finals. Jack's father and English teacher both commented on his impressive contributions to extra-curricular activities and the passion he has for activities and competitions outside the classroom.

When asked whether he believed he was gifted in English, Jack demonstrated a high level of awareness and confidence in his ability.

"Yip, I think I'm gifted in English. Other people may disagree (laughs). I just get stuff and I can get an Excellence without trying. I see other people trying so hard in English and they can't do anything as good as me. I know this sounds cocky but it's the truth" (Interview, Jack).

Jack's father believed he was "extremely gifted" and had a special talent for English. Jack's father has been aware of Jack's gifts from a young age, particularly when Jack learned to read and write before any of his peers. Jack's English teacher believes Jack is one of the most gifted students she has ever taught. In an interview, his English teacher stated that the work he produces exceeds all teachers' expectations. She reported that his work is comparable to that of a year thirteen student. She believes Jack could be passing at a NCEA Level Two or Level Three.

However, in contrast with his ability, his achievement record is very inconsistent. Reports from his Intermediate school suggest Jack would excel in some areas in English and would fail in others. Now in his first year of High School, this trend seems to be continuing. Jack seems to be choosing which assessments he completes, and this is having a detrimental effect on his achievement record. Table 22 below summarises Jack’s assessment date for 2009 to date.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Merit
Mathematics	Excellence
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Achieved
Social Studies	Achieved
Physical Education	Achieved

Table 22: Jack’s Assessment Results (2009 to date).

Although this may appear to be the achievement record of a student who is succeeding, Jack’s English teacher, his other teachers, his father and Jack himself all believe this is well below his capabilities. Jack, his father and his English teacher all believe Jack is currently underachieving.

“English comes so easily to Jack. He should be getting Excellence grades for everything he does and yet he’s not. Yes, he is definitely underachieving in English and yes, it is very concerning” (Interview, Jack’s dad).

When asked whether he believes he is underachieving in English, Jack responded:

“Yeah, I am. And that sucks because English is my best subject. The problem is that I don’t know what to do about it. I just won’t do the work if I find it boring which sounds so arrogant but it’s the truth” (Interview, Jack).

According to Jack’s English teacher, the work he does complete is well beyond the level of those of his peers and reflects a mature and perceptive understanding of the texts that have been studied. Jack gains ‘Excellence’ for all work that is completed and handed in.

However, Jack does not hand in some work or leaves it incomplete, resulting in some ‘Not Achieved’ grades on his achievement record. Examining school reports, this seems to be a trend across the curriculum for Jack. Although he does gain ‘Excellence’ grades, he also gains ‘Not Achieved’ grades for the incomplete work, and therefore his assessment averages are lower than what may be expected.

When asked about his achievement this year to date, Jack replied:

“Really mixed. For some things I got an Excellence, like my Creative Writing, but for some things I got Not Achieved, but that’s all the stuff I didn’t really attempt” (Interview, Jack).

Jack’s behaviour is described as “excellent” by his English teacher and in his school reports. All teachers commented that Jack was quiet and hard-working in class. Jack’s English teacher believes class discussions are one of Jack’s strengths. She stated that he always contributes to class discussions and activities and demonstrates his exceptional talent for

English. According to his teacher, he often takes a leadership role in group work and discussions and “raises the bar for all students” (Interview, Jack’s English teacher).

However, despite his excellent behaviour, Jack’s English teacher states that she finds it particularly frustrating and confusing that so much of his work remains incomplete.

“Jack always works quietly in class. I mean, he always appears to be working. However, when it comes time to hand in work, Jack often has nothing to show for it. I just don’t understand this. I see him working, but sometimes he is unable to produce any evidence. Maybe I need to be monitoring him more closely?” (Interview, Jack’s English teacher).

Jack’s English teacher’s comments were re-iterated by most of Jack’s teachers in his school reports. Report comments stated that Jack would take work home to finish it but it would never come back, that some of his work ended up in the bin, and Jack showed “no concern for deadlines”. Many of Jack’s teachers believed he only completed work that he was interested in or personally motivated to complete.

When questioned about his work ethic and task completion in the interview, Jack spoke very honestly about his need for perfection. Jack believes the reason behind his ‘Not Submitted’ and ‘Not Achieved’ grades is his tendency to make work perfect. Jack believes he does work hard in class and is always on task; however, he often re-works assessments many times and sometimes fails to complete them by the deadline. Sometimes Jack prefers not to hand in work if it is below his personal standards. Jack believes gaining a ‘Not Achieved’ grade is preferable to handing in work that is below his abilities.

“If I did complete my assessments I would be doing really well. Unfortunately I spend way too much time trying to get stuff perfect. You wouldn’t believe how much of my work ends up in the bin. I don’t know why, but my assessments just don’t get finished” (Interview, Jack).

“I hate handing in something that’s not my best. I try explaining that to teachers but they don’t really get it. A deadline’s a deadline. That’s all they care about” (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Jack).

In the Heacox questionnaire and in the interview, Jack demonstrated anxiousness when questioned about deadlines. In the Heacox questionnaire, Jack’s responses suggested deadlines were the largest contributor to his underachievement. In the interview, Jack became visibly distressed when speaking about deadlines, stating that they made him very stressed and “put too much pressure” on him. Jack re-iterated in both the interview and questionnaire that an absence of deadlines would help take the pressure off and would help him achieve to his potential.

Jack demonstrated an interest and passion for English. This was also confirmed by his father and English teacher. However, it appeared that Jack was only interested in some assessments and became less interested by other activities, subjects or assessments.

“I really like all the creative stuff – static images, Creative Writing and Formal Writing. There is no right or wrong and you get to choose your own topic. I also love analysing texts, but

only if they mean something to me” (Interview, Jack).

Being interested or motivated in a task appeared to be a very important factor in Jack’s achievement and completion of work. According to Jack’s English teacher, if Jack is invested in a task, he will work diligently to complete it to a very high standard. She believes Jack’s best English results come from assessments that he has been truly interested in. Jack’s father also stated that being interested in the subject and topic was very important to Jack’s achievement:

“Jack needs to be given choice in what he studies and how he learns. If he is made to study something he doesn’t have any interest in, he finds it hard to remain focused” (Interview, Jack’s dad).

One of the major topics that came up in Jack’s interview was group work. Jack became visibly frustrated when speaking about group work, stating that he either does all of the work or stands back and lets the group do everything. Jack appeared frustrated at the ability levels of other students in the class who were placed into groups with him. It became very obvious in the questionnaire and interview that Jack would much rather spend time working on his own independent work and challenging himself than working with his peers on less challenging work. Similarly, Jack showed frustration when speaking about helping less capable students. Jack was frustrated that he had to spend his class time working with those that were below his ability level. He was desperate to be allowed to spend this time doing things that interested him and advancing his own knowledge.

"Group work. Ah! I can't stand it. I just let my group do all the work then pretend I'm helping when the teacher comes around. And the other thing – why do teachers always make us help dumb students? My teacher says to me – 'you are really good at this. I want you to work with blah blah to help them'. As if! That's their job. I don't get paid to do this stuff" (Interview, Jack).

"Don't get us to help dumb students. If we have finished our work, we should be allowed to do more interesting stuff" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Jack).

Jack was very complimentary of his teachers, particularly his English teacher, stating that they often go out of their way to help him succeed:

"Most teachers make an effort. I know they want me to be engaged" (Interview, Jack).

When interviewed about his favourite topics or assessments in English, Jack spoke animatedly about the choice and independence he had been given recently:

"Some of my teachers give me individual projects to work on. I love this, cos I can work at my own pace and focus on something that interests me and motivates me. When our class studied short stories, I did a poetry unit and studied the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and even wrote my own poetry. I will always remember that and I learned heaps" (Interview, Jack).

When asked what could help him to succeed in English, both Jack and his father spoke of the choice, variety and independence that was obviously so important to Jack.

“Jack enjoys choosing his own activities and working on things that interest him” (Interview, Jack’s dad).

“I would want to do the same stuff – Poetry, novel, formal writing and all that, but I would want more choice. I would want to choose my own texts” (Interview, Jack).

When asked whether Jack’s needs were being met at his current school, Jack’s father stated that they were not. Jack’s father believed this was impossible in large class sizes in his current school:

“No, Jack’s needs are not being met, but I don’t think this is possible in a large secondary school. His classes have at least 30 students in them and there is only one teacher. Asking for special treatment for Jack would be unfair to the other 29 students” (Interview, Jack’s dad).

Jack is a highly talented, exceptionally gifted student. It appears that Jack is still passionate about English and motivated to achieve. A pursuit for perfection and a lack of interest in some assessments appear to be Jack’s only impediments to success.

4.11 Matthew

Matthew is a 13 year old, year nine student who has been identified by his school as “severely underachieving” in English and across many of his subjects. Formative test results, work samples and teacher observations have led to the identification of Matthew as a “moderately gifted” English student. Matthew’s behaviour has become a concern and is leading to incomplete work and work handed in that is well below his abilities. Table 23 below summarises Matthew’s formative test results for 2009.

Formative Test	Grade/Result
P.A.T (English)	Stanine 9
STAR (English)	Stanine 9
Comprehension	95%
Vocabulary	97%
Reading age	16

Table 23: Matthew’s Formative Assessment Results (2009)

PAT and STAR English tests assess Matthew at Stanine 9, the highest possible score in the test. Examining Intermediate school data shows that Matthew also gained Stanine 9 results in years seven and eight. Matthew’s Comprehension and Vocabulary tests also produce very high results, placing him second in year nine for the school and in the top five percent of year nine students nationally. Matthew’s reading age has been predicted to be 16 years,

approximately three years above that of his actual age.

Matthew's mother and English teacher provide more evidence of Matthew's giftedness in English. According to his English teacher, Matthew has many talents in English, particularly in Speechmaking. Matthew is able to entertain the class with confidence and humour and seems at ease in front of his peers. Matthew's English teacher believes his analysis of texts is also particularly outstanding. Her comments suggest Matthew is able to analyse complex texts to produce mature and insightful insights. She believes his comprehension level is well above that of his peers.

Matthew's mother states that he has always been a prolific reader and learned to read and write well before other children. Matthew's mother also comments on his sense of humour and wit, stating she believes it to be extremely advanced for his age. Matthew's English teacher agrees with this observation, stating that Matthew's sense of humour is very advanced and he can "keep up" with adult conversation.

Matthew demonstrated a passion and excitement for English in his questionnaire and interview. When asked to name his favourite subject, Matthew quickly identified English. He spoke enthusiastically about the topics and assessments in English, stating it was the one subject he looked forward to in the day. Matthew even mentioned he would like to do something with English for a career. He would like to study English at University, and would consider being a journalist, film critic or author for a living.

“Creative Writing is cool. Same with film studies. I like stuff where you get to use your brain and be a bit creative” (Interview, Matthew).

Matthew also spoke enthusiastically about being challenged in class. Matthew stated that he liked work that made him think and challenged him to use his brain. Matthew believes he becomes unmotivated once learning becomes too easy or repetitive.

“Learning never gets too hard. It’s when it gets boring that I give up” (Interview, Matthew).

However, there seems to be a major discrepancy between Matthew’s talents, passion for English and his assessment results. Comments on Matthew’s previous school reports suggest he is seriously underachieving. Table 24 below details Matthew’s assessment results for the year so far.

Subject	Average Assessment Result
English	Not Achieved
Mathematics	Not Achieved
Science (Physics & Chemistry)	Not Achieved
Social Studies	Not Achieved
Physical Education	Achieved

Table 24: Matthew’s Assessment Results (2009 to date).

The only subject that Matthew is passing is Physical Education. These assessment results match his results from his Intermediate records. According to these records, Matthew was failing in most subject areas, mostly due to unwillingness to complete work and poor behaviour. Matthew's English teacher talked openly about her concern for Matthew, as she believes this is a very concerning achievement record for a year nine student. She expressed distress at the academic future for Matthew, particularly when he begins his NCEA studies.

Matthew, his mother and his English teacher all agree that he is seriously underachieving in English and across many of his subject areas. Matthew's mother expressed frustration as Matthew is a very bright student but cannot seem to achieve.

"Matthew's teachers are always calling me because he is not working in class and doesn't do his homework. It really worries me. He can't achieve if he carries on like this" (Interview, Matthew's mum).

Matthew's mother also states that she believes school is a low priority for Matthew. She believes his poor attitude towards school may be causing his underachievement.

"Matthew loves school, but that's because he loves seeing his friends. As for the actual education – not so much. Matthew is always getting himself into trouble and cannot see the importance of school. It's all a bit of a joke to him" (Interview, Matthew's mum).

A major factor in Matthew's underachievement is his poor behaviour in class. According to Matthew's English teacher, Matthew is very distracted in class and struggles to sit still to focus on one task. He can also be disruptive to other students, particularly when he is not engaged. Matthew's English teacher states he is the "class clown" and enjoys entertaining staff and students. She said entertaining the class seems to take priority over completing any work. Despite his distracted behaviour, report comments suggest Matthew always remains polite and respectful to staff members.

Matthew confirms his English's teacher's comments by stating that his behaviour is the largest impediment to his achievement. Matthew believes he does not have the ability to sit still and focus. When asked to describe his behaviour, Matthew stated:

"Bad. I annoy the teachers and everyone around me. It's not my fault. I've got ants in my pants!" (Interview, Matthew).

Matthew's mother agrees that Matthew sees himself as the class clown:

"Matthew is the class clown. I don't know why he can't just do his work" (Interview, Matthew's mum).

The other major factor in Matthew's underachievement is his poor work ethic. Matthew's English teacher describes him as a student who starts work but very rarely finishes it. He is un-focused in class, distracted and unwilling to put effort into his work. Her comments suggest Matthew's work is incomplete, rushed and well below his ability. She also states

that Matthew has been known to lie about handing in work and makes many promises to complete work for homework but it is never done. According to Matthew's English teacher, he very rarely completes homework and does not demonstrate any recognition of the importance of his schoolwork. Matthew has failed to achieve any English assessments this year, despite his incredible talent for this subject. She believes Matthew's current level of work is well below his ability and evidence of his underachievement in English. Matthew's English teacher believes his lack of focus and application to his work is the major factor in his underachievement.

The Heacox questionnaire asked Matthew to rate his work ethic and attitude towards his school work. He rated himself as 'poor' in both areas and had the following comments to make:

"I muck around in class too much. That's why I don't get things done. At least that's what the teachers are always telling me" (Interview, Matthew).

"I'm not so good at listening in class so I always do things wrong" (Written response to Heacox questionnaire, Matthew).

When asked about what could help Matthew to succeed in English, Matthew and his mother both had similar ideas. They both spoke of interest, variety, choice and independence.

Matthew and his mother also both commented on the importance of getting outside the classroom and learning in an environment that is more natural to Matthew. In the interview, Matthew and his mother both talked about his lack of focus in the classroom and

his inability to focus on tasks for long periods of time. They both believed it was important for Matthew to get out of the classroom to help him become more engaged and focused.

“There would be no desks. We would be allowed to go outside whenever we wanted, work on computers when we wanted, or just lie on the floor and read. The classroom would be more like home. And we would be able to work on whatever we wanted whenever we wanted. And no more deadlines. And no more marks either, that would help” (Interview, Matthew).

“Matthew gets bored really easily. If the work is too easy he won’t do it. If it is all sitting at a desk and writing he also won’t do it. He needs some variety and interest. He needs to spend some time on a computer or take part in a play, stuff like that” (Interview, Matthew’s mum).

Matthew’s mother also provided practical suggestions for English teachers to help engage Matthew in his learning. She believed it was important to provide variety and choice so that he stayed engaged in the tasks. She also suggested that Matthew could achieve to a higher level if he could be assessed in a range of different ways, rather than being assessed through writing all of the time.

“Matthew likes variety – not all writing. He enjoys working on computers, drawing, talking and acting. I think he would do much better in school if there was more variety in what he was doing” (Interview, Matthew’s mum).

Matthew spoke with animation and excitement when asked to suggest ways in which he would like to learn. Matthew seemed passionate when providing 'ideas' for his English teachers to help him succeed. His suggestions focused on choice, interest, and the ability to learn in through a variety of different teaching methods.

"Give us more opportunities to talk about stuff and debate topics. Not everything should be writing. Also there are way too many essays in English. Maybe we could be allowed to do more static images or speeches or more work on computers. Stuff like that would be really good" (Interview, Matthew).

Matthew is a different type of underachiever and another challenge for educators. He is obviously gifted in English, but has possibly been underachieving for some time. He is passionate and excited about English, but fails to translate this excitement into results. Matthew's behaviour is poor in class and he shows a lack of focus and attention to his work. His interviews reflect a desire for more variety and choice in English. Particularly, Matthew desires to be assessed in a range of different ways that are not just focused on writing.

4.12 Summary

These participant profiles indicate that underachievement is a unique, complicated and multi-faceted issue. These participants represent the range of underachievement, from those who are achieving (but to a level below their capabilities) to those students who are

seriously underachieving and are at risk of failing English. For some of these participants, their underachievement is beginning to have a significant impact on their future school and career choices. The behaviours of these students also vary greatly. Some students are described as working well in class whereas other students are disengaged or have serious behavioural problems. It becomes apparent that there is no simple definition or measurement of underachievement. However, for all of these students, there is a clear disparity between their abilities and their achievement in English.

These profiles reveal that these are ten very different students. These ten profiles also reveal unique and individualised needs. There is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution to the underachievement of these ten participants. However, the profiles do reveal common beliefs, opinions, and attitudes towards English. The following chapter will examine these common trends and themes in closer detail to uncover the most common causes of underachievement. Although these ten participants require individualised attention, it is hoped that a discussion of these common causes of underachievement will provide some support to teachers to begin curbing the underachievement of gifted students.

Chapter Five: Results

5.1 Responses to Heacox (1991) “Up from Underachievement” Questionnaire

Although these are a diverse and unique group of student participants, a close examination of responses to the Heacox questionnaire illustrates common themes and trends. These students seem to have very similar beliefs and opinions of English. Examining the results of the Heacox questionnaire will help illuminate these students’ issues in English and the factors impeding their achievement. Table 1 below summarises the ten participants’ responses to the different items on the Heacox questionnaire.

Table 25 below shows the mean response for each of the items in the Heacox questionnaire. Student participants rated every item on a scale of 1-5. A score of one means strongly disagree and a score of 5 means strongly agree.

Statement	Mean Response	
I leave assignments and projects until the last minute.	4.2	Agree
In order to get something done, I may settle for less than my best.	1.8	Disagree
If I have to choose between my school work and almost any other activity, the school work comes in second.	3.4	Neutral
Because I am not prepared for class, I feel anxious and upset about school.	3.8	Neutral
I worry about being embarrassed in school if the teacher calls on me and I don't know the answer.	1.4	Strongly disagree
I am worried that my friends will find out that I am not doing well in school.	1.4	Strongly disagree
When learning seems too hard, I just give up.	1.6	Disagree
My teachers don't seem to know or care about how I learn best.	2	Disagree
I sometimes find out that I have done an assignment incorrectly because I don't understand the directions.	4.2	Agree
I forget the dates that assignments are due.	1.6	Disagree
I purposely don't do well on some assignments so that my friends won't think I'm a nerd.	2.6	Neutral
I avoid new things because I may not be good enough at them.	4.1	Agree
I sometimes find myself daydreaming in class.	4.8	Strongly agree
Sometimes I turn my work in late because I'm not satisfied with the job I did and I need more time to revise it.	4.1	Agree
Sometimes my teachers use words I don't understand.	1.2	Strongly disagree
Big projects overwhelm me. I think I'll never get them done.	4.2	Agree
I don't know some of the things my teachers expect me to know.	1.8	Disagree
I have a hard time asking for help.	4	Agree

Table 25: Heacox Questionnaire Participant Responses

The discussion that follows examines students' responses in further detail. Although participants were only expected to circle a number to illustrate their level of agreement, many participants also included written comments explaining their opinion or commenting on something specific. Some students also willingly volunteered information about the questionnaire during the interview. Some of the most common responses are detailed below.

1. I leave assignments and projects until the last minute.

Average response – 4.2 (Agree). Some students commented that they finished assignments quickly so they could have free time in class. Most students left work until the last minute to avoid 'extra' work. Another very common reason for leaving work until the last minute was because it was too easy and/or boring – students felt un-motivated. Two students commented they finished work on time if it was interesting or challenging.

2. In order to get something done, I may settle for less than my best.

Average response - 1.8 (Disagree). The majority of students commented they would rather not complete work than hand in something 'sub-standard', as Shaun explained;

"Nah. I hate handing in work that is not my best. I guess that's why I have so many 'incomplete' grades on my record".

3. If I have to choose between my school work and almost any other activity, the school work comes in second.

Average response – 3.4 (Neutral). This question resulted in very mixed responses. Students stated it depended on the subject and activity. School work was the activity of choice when it was interesting, it was worth credits, or when there was a severe consequence for non-completion.

4. Because I am not prepared for class, I feel anxious and upset about school.

Average response - 3.8 (neutral). Some students did not care about being prepared for class. Others commented that they would sometimes miss school or periods because they had not done their work and were afraid of the consequences. One student commented that he had missed Maths for the past four weeks because he was so behind with the work. When questioned further, some students were worried about the reaction of the teacher, but most were disappointed with themselves and did not want to own up to their underachievement.

5. I worry about being embarrassed in school if the teacher calls on me and I don't know the answer.

Average response - 1.4 (Disagree). Students' comments showed they were very confident in their own abilities and knowledge. Students would be embarrassed not because they did not know the answer, but they were afraid of looking like a "geek" in front of their peers. Students stated their peers believed they were "dumb".

"My mates all think I'm cabbage. That's kinda funny to me" (Jordan).

"I don't want my mates knowing I actually know stuff. That's shame. No one wants to be a nerd" (Max).

"If the teacher asks me a question, I always pretend I don't know the answer. No one really cares. The teacher just expects that. I think they ask me questions just to make sure I'm actually listening" (Phillip).

Students were very concerned about their teachers' apparent lack of expectations for the students. All students commented most of their teachers believed they were dumb or a "waste of space". The students showed a strong desire for the teachers to have higher expectations and to acknowledge their intellect. This created conflict for the students – they wanted their peers thinking they were dumb, but wanted their teachers to know their 'true' intelligence. No student had a solution to over-coming this conflict.

"My Science teacher thinks I'm dumb. That actually really hurts me. I mean, come on, I could probably teach this stuff better than him. I just wish he could see that" (Joe).

"I want my teachers to know I'm smart, but at the same time I'm scared of them knowing 'cos then they might push me or embarrass me in front of my mates" (Matiu).

"My teachers think I'm a waste of space. Do I care? Yeah, actually I do, 'cos I reckon I could be pretty great with a bit of help" (Wiremu).

6. I am worried that my friends will find out that I am not doing well in school.

Average response - 1.4 (Strongly disagree). Overwhelmingly students did not care about their friends finding out about their underachievement. As mentioned in the previous

question, students were aware that their peers thought they were 'dumb'. However, the interviews revealed that what was important was their parents' reactions. Students showed a strong concern that their parents might think they are dumb and they did not want this.

7. When learning seems too hard, I just give up.

Average response - 1.6 (Disagree). Students were very keen for a challenge. Students were very keen to be given interesting, challenging and motivating work. Many students felt unmotivated when they were presented with easy work. Instead, students' comments suggested they wanted work that would challenge them academically.

"Learning never gets too hard. It's when it gets boring that I give up" (Matthew).

"Bring on the challenge, I say!" (Jack).

"Cos my teachers think I'm dumb I only get easy work so I give up. If I got harder work I think I would be more into it. But it's a catch-22 – I don't do the work, so the teacher gives me easy work which I don't do and so on. It's like the chicken and the egg, instead this is a never-ending cycle of cabbage work" (Phillip).

However, students seemed reluctant for teachers to put too much pressure on them or to give them too much of a challenge. Students seemed to prefer to motivate themselves.

"Sometimes I will hand in a piece of work that I know is not my best and the teacher wants me to do it better. Then I can't be bothered. As soon as the teacher puts on the pressure, that's when I'm outta here" (Brad).

"Sweet as, teachers. If you want to give us a challenge that's fine by me. But don't put the pressure on big time. I wanna challenge myself. I hate when people put this false pressure on me. It may matter to you but it doesn't to me, OK?" (Shaun).

8. My teachers don't seem to know or care about how I learn best.

Average response - 2 (Disagree). Students believed their teachers did care and did make an effort. The problem seemed to be that teachers didn't know how best to cater for these students and were going about it in the wrong way.

"Most teachers make an effort. I know they want me to be engaged" (Jack).

"I feel stink because I can see my teachers do care and they try really hard. I don't really know what the answer is. I know I would do better work if it was more 'my thing'. But I don't know what 'my thing' is and I don't think the teachers know either" (Jordan).

"But what we want is interesting work, not just more work. I don't think all of my teachers get that" (Max).

"Choice is not always good. Some teachers give me all this choice and think I will automatically be interested. That's not how it goes, not for me anyway. It's gotta be interesting, I've gotta be into it" (Shaun).

8. I sometimes find out that I have done an assignment incorrectly because I didn't understand the directions, or because I didn't check the directions to see if I was doing it right.

Average response - 4.2 (Agree). Overwhelmingly students agreed with this statement.

Students commented they often get carried away doing their own thing, or try to be creative but they don't meet the criteria. Not having class notes was another significant issue.

"I can't be bothered copying down class notes so I never know if I'm doing something right.

The teachers will get the class to copy down the directions like in Science or something so you do it right but I can't be bothered. I get in trouble for not having the notes, then I get in trouble cos I did the assignment wrong" (Brad).

"I will try to do it my own way but it has to meet the criteria. That really sux. Surely teachers should just be happy that it's done?" (Wiremu).

"I'm not so good at listening in class so I always do things wrong" (Matthew).

9. I forget the dates that assignments are due.

Average response - 1.2 (Strongly Disagree). Students seemed to have a good understanding of when assignments were due. Other factors were preventing them from getting the work in on time such as a lack of motivation, a lack of interest, or an inability to finish the work to a good standard by the deadline.

"How can you forget when the teacher reminds you like ten times a day? Nah, I just don't do them" (Matthew).

"Me and deadlines are not friends. You can't put a deadline on creativity!" (Joe).

"To be honest, I just don't get things done. Even if I know the due date, I just don't do things" (Max).

"Sometimes I have really good intentions of getting my assignments done but they just don't happen" (Matiu).

10. I purposely don't do well on some assignments so that my friends won't think I'm a nerd.

Average response - 2.6 (Disagree). As stated in above questions, students were not concerned about being seen as a "cabbage", but were not so keen on being seen as a nerd.

"I don't really care what my friends think" (Wiremu).

"To be honest, I just can't be bothered. It's got nothing to do with my friends" (Jordan).

"If I do something I like to do my best. The reason I don't complete work is cos it's rubbish, not cos of what my friends think" (Phillip).

"My friends think I'm dumber than I am. I think they would get a fright if they realised how much I know" (Brad).

11. I avoid new things because I may not be good enough at them.

Average response - 4.1. (Agree). Most students commented they liked to know they would succeed in a task before beginning it. Students were uncomfortable with the idea of tackling a task if they believed they may fail.

"Yeah, I hate looking dumb when I try new things" (Jordan).

"I guess I'm kinda a perfectionist when it comes to stuff. I don't really like to try new things cos what if I don't succeed? I like to do well at stuff" (Joe).

"What's the point? I know what I'm good at and I stick to it" (Matiu).

12. I sometimes find myself daydreaming in class.

Average response - 4.8 (Strongly agree). Overwhelmingly, students agreed that they often daydream in class. The most common reason for daydreaming was boredom, feeling unchallenged, or failing to see the significance of the work.

13. Sometimes I turn my work in late because I'm not satisfied with the job I did and need more time to revise it.

Average response - 4.1 (Agree). Students admitted they were often late in handing in work, although there were great variations in the reasons. Some students' comments suggested they would rather hand in something that was of high quality than to rush something to meet a deadline. Other students cited distraction and a lack of interest and motivation as reasons for not meeting deadlines.

"My work is always late! But what would the teacher prefer – something rubbish and on time or late and awesome?" (Shaun).

"I don't hand in work on time because I just don't get it done in time. Pretty simple, really"
(Max).

"I muck around in class too much. That's why I don't get things done. At least that's what the teachers are always telling me" (Matthew).

"I hate handing in something that's not my best. I try explaining that to teachers but they don't really get it. A deadline's a deadline. That's all they care about" (Jack).

14. Sometimes my teachers use words I don't understand.

Average response - 1.2 (Strongly disagree). All students were confident in their own vocabulary and thought they mostly understood what their teachers were saying.

15. Big projects overwhelm me. I think I'll never get them done.

Average response - 4.2 (Agree). Students were concerned about the prospect of big projects. They cited time management and a lack of focus as their major constraints to completing major projects.

"I hate monitoring my own time" (Matiu).

"I need checkpoints and deadlines" (Brad).

"I get side-tracked!" (Jordan).

"It's good if it's something you're interested in, otherwise it's just a waste of time. We're not gonna do it" (Max).

16. I don't know some of the things my teachers expect me to know.

Average response – 1.8 (Disagree). Students were confident of their own abilities and (in general) believed teachers had low expectations of their abilities.

"I reckon I know more than they think I know" (Wiremu).

"My teachers don't know what I'm capable of. That's not because they don't care, it's just because I've never shown them" (Brad).

17. I have a hard time asking for help.

Average response – 4.6 (Strongly Agree). Students saw asking for help as a sign of weakness and were worried about their peer's reactions.

"You look like a loser if you are always asking for help or asking questions" (Wiremu).

"I get angry if I can't do it myself. I never ask for help" (Phillip).

5.2 Factors Impeding Achievement – Introduction

Although these participants are a wide and diverse group of students, there were common factors expressed that impede achievement. These students may have different experiences with underachievement, but they expressed similar concerns, fears, frustrations and opinions. A close examination of the factors impeding achievement may help educators meet the needs of these students. These include NCEA, extracurricular involvement, attendance, welfare, perfectionism, teachers' opinions of students, group work and variety.

5.3 National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA)

One of the most common subjects discussed was the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and the impact it can have on motivation and achievement. Many students and parents expressed concern over the demands that NCEA placed on students. There were concerns voiced over deadlines, amount of homework and the immense pressure of gaining credits.

There were also concerns expressed that NCEA is too rigid and inflexible. Parents and students both commented that NCEA disables individualised learning. Parents and students both believed NCEA prevents learning about the topics that interest you, and instead it forces students to study topics that may have no personal interest for them. It was also believed that NCEA restricts the teacher's ability to cater to different learning needs and preferences.

In many interviews the movement from the junior school to the senior school was expressed as a factor in underachievement. Parents and students spoke favourably of the junior school (years nine and ten), commenting that it gave students the ability to study topics that interested them and learn in a variety of ways. Students, parents and teachers cited examples of independent projects as the types of assessment students were able to complete in the junior school. All participants believed this type of choice, independence and variety was not available under the current implementation of the NCEA system in the senior school. Many parents cited the movement from junior school to the senior school as the point at which their sons began underachieving.

“Phillip used to love working on his own independent projects. I could never stop him doing homework when he was doing one of those. What a shame they can’t do those at NCEA”
(Interview, Phillip’s dad).

“Matiu loved English in the junior school, but hates it now. Maybe it’s because there’s too much pressure? Maybe it’s because there’s nothing to keep him interested or motivated? I’m not sure, but it is really upsetting” (Interview, Matiu’s mum).

“I would like NCEA to be more interesting and motivating for Phillip. He loved the junior school because it was so interesting and he had so much choice. I know it’s not possible, but I would love for NCEA to be just like the junior school” (Interview, Phillip’s dad).

The NCEA credit system was also commented on throughout the interviews by students, parents and teachers. Many participants believed the current NCEA system was demotivating for students. Participants expressed frustration that a grade of ‘Achieved’ was

worth the same credits as a grade of 'Excellence'. Some parents believed this provided their sons with no motivation to aim for the higher grades.

"I think NCEA is the problem. Matiu only aims for Achieved, because that gets him the credits. There is no incentive to aim any higher. He also chooses which assessments he is going to sit. I don't think this is good enough – every student should be required to sit every assessment. That is just breeding laziness" (Interview, Matiu's mum).

Other parents and teachers commented on the students' ability to 'pick and choose' assessments under the NCEA system. Currently, students are able to select which standards (internal assessments and external examinations) they will sit. Parents and teachers commented that students were willingly opting out of assessments and standards, knowing how the system works. Some parents expressed frustration with this system, stating that there was no motivation for students to aim high, and it was becoming too easy for students to underachieve. Many parents believed students should be "forced to" sit all of the standards and assessments, as was expected under the old School Certificate, University Entrance and Bursary qualification systems.

"I have serious concerns about NCEA. It seems to place a lot of stress and pressure on the students. I don't like the way they can choose which assessments they sit. Phillip always opts out of credits because they are too hard. I also don't like the way they only have to get an Achieved to get the credits. There is no point in getting Excellences" (Interview, Phillip's dad).

“NCEA has been a major factor in Shaun’s underachievement. The only assessment he has chosen to attempt is the Creative Writing. He has also opted out of all papers in the final exam. My concern is that NCEA is giving him too much choice. If he could be made to sit these assessments, I’m sure he would achieve” (Interview, Shaun’s English teacher).

5.4 Interest as a motivating tool

For all ten participants, it became obvious that interest in a subject, activity or assessment was essential to success. All ten participants commented on their enjoyment and interest in certain areas, and it was this enjoyment that led them to achieving. The ten participants suggested that if they were un-motivated or had a lack of interest in the assessment, they would not complete it. For all ten participants, it seems as if personal interest is a stronger motivating tool than achievement. Students are successfully completing tasks they are interested in, but are choosing not to complete the tasks or handing in sub-standard work for tasks that do not interest them.

“I got an Excellence for my film essay. I loved that film and I just had so much to write about it. I didn’t pass anything else, not because I’m dumb, but because I couldn’t be bothered. I just don’t get poems about love. It’s not my thing, so I’m not going to write about it. If teachers gave me more stuff I was interested in I reckon I could do really well” (Interview, Joe).

“I did really well in the things I tried in, like Creative Writing, but I failed everything else that I couldn’t be bothered doing” (Interview, Jordan).

"I think it's because I wanna work hard at the stuff I enjoy. When I put in the effort I usually get an Excellence. If I don't try I end up with a Not Achieved. It all comes down to what I feel like doing" (Interview, Max).

Students' academic records were very diverse. For all ten participants their academic achievement for 2009 to date includes 'Excellence' results for some tasks and 'Not Achieved' results for other tasks. All ten students had a number of 'Not Submitted' results on their achievement record, even for the participants who are achieving to a satisfactory level. This further supports the finding that students are excelling in tasks that gain their attention or interest, but are underachieving in tasks that do not interest them. For some students, they prefer not to complete the work if it has no personal interest to them, despite the fact that this will result in a 'Not Achieved' grade.

5.5 Attendance

One of the major factors leading to underachievement for some of the students was attendance. For Brad, Matiu, Wiremu and Jordan, attendance has become such a big issue that it is beginning to impact on their achievement in English. For Brad, his attendance was estimated to be approximately fifty percent. This suggests he is missing half of the school year. In Wiremu's case, suspensions and stand-downs have led to compulsory time away from school. When he is in school, he is often late to class and therefore not admitted to the lesson. Matiu has missed so much school that when he is in class he is un-motivated as

he is too far behind with the work to catch up. Matiu's English teacher states that he would prefer to sit there in class and do nothing rather than make an attempt to catch up on the work. Jordan has missed school because of sports and cultural events; however, he also admits that he truant on occasion. All four students stated that poor attendance was making it difficult to achieve.

"When I am in class it's hard, you know? They are all writing essays or doing maths problems and I have no idea what's going on. It's easier to just sit there and be bored"
(Interview, Matiu).

"I'm so far behind that I've just given up. I have no idea what's going on and I'm going to fail anyway, so what's the point? My teachers don't wanna help me cos they know I will just be away for the next few days anyway" (Interview, Brad).

"When you are absent you miss out on heaps of stuff. Sometimes I can't be bothered catching up cos it's just too hard" (Interview, Jordan).

"It's not my fault I'm away so much. They should stop standing me down if they want me to be in school (laughs). But seriously, how am I supposed to pass anything if I'm never allowed at school or in class?" (Interview, Wiremu).

Some of the parents expressed frustration and distress at their sons' lack of attendance.

Getting students to school seemed to be a difficult task for many parents.

"When I leave for work he's in his uniform and ready to go. Later that day I get a phone call to say he never made it to school. What am I supposed to do?" (Interview, Brad's mum).

"I do my best. I put him on the bus but somehow he never makes it into school. What am I supposed to do?" (Interview, Wiremu's mum).

"Matiu's never going to achieve if he can't improve his attendance" (Interview, Matiu's mum).

"Jordan has so many commitments that he does miss a large amount of school. I'm not sure what the answer is. I want him to continue with his commitments but he also needs to achieve" (Interview, Jordan's Koro).

When questioned about what was leading to this poor attendance, all responses pointed to disengagement. Students mentioned boredom, frustration and lack of challenge as reasons why they did not want to be in class. Parents also mentioned that the students were not interested in the work, were unmotivated and had no incentive to achieve. Parents also mentioned that their sons failed to see the relevance of school and the classroom activities, which was resulting in poor attendance. Several parents also mentioned their sons were waiting to leave school to go into the workforce which held more incentive for them than school. Clearly, poor attendance is having a large impact on achievement for these four students. It is also possible that attendance may become an issue for the other six students as they move through the school.

5.6 Concern for Welfare

Concern for students' welfare was a common theme across the interviews. Throughout the questionnaires and interviews, there was a suggestion that students are struggling physically

and mentally, which is almost certainly resulting in underachievement. In the interviews, many teachers commented that students seemed to be withdrawn, quiet and disengaged in class. Phillip, Jack, Joe and Max have been observed to be sitting quietly in class, however they are often not completing the work. Phillip's English teacher stated that he often "stares into space" and Jack's English teacher commented that he is often "doodling on his paper, miles away". Although these students are well behaved in class, they are clearly disengaged from the class and the work. Students such as Shaun, Jordan and Joe become animated and alive when participating in class discussions, but quickly become withdrawn and quiet when they are expected to be working independently. Shaun, Jordan and Max commented that they prefer playing games on the computer to school work and will "sneak on" to games whenever they can get away with it. Teachers commented that they are not problematic in the classroom because they stay quiet, but they are concerned to see our gifted students so disengaged and withdrawn in class.

Matthew, Wiremu and Brad are all described as being poorly behaved in class. Matthew is described as the "class clown" and seems more interested in entertaining the class than completing work. Brad is distracted and disruptive to other students. Wiremu is described as being "out of control" in the classroom. He can become physically and verbally abusive and tends to intimidate other students. Wiremu and Brad can become aggressive and threatening when challenged about their behaviour. Their disruptive behaviour is a clear indication that these students are bored and unmotivated. In the case of many students, their behaviour may also be a 'disguise' to their actual ability.

Teachers and parents also mentioned possible substance abuse when discussing some of the participants. Matiu, Phillip, Brad, Wiremu and Shaun were all mentioned in the interviews as having possible problems with alcohol and/or drugs. It is possible these students are self-medicating as a way in which to counter the boredom.

5.7 Extra-curricular Involvement

In general, participants have a distinct lack of extra-curricular involvement or hobbies. When questioned about extra-curricular involvement in the interview and questionnaire, only two participants were involved in anything on a committed basis. The other eight participants struggled to name anything as extra-curricular involvement. When questioned about hobbies or interests, eight participants struggled to identify anything as being a particular hobby. For many participants, watching TV and playing computer games seemed to be their only interest.

"I don't know. I play heaps of Xbox. Does that count?" (Interview, Phillip).

"I just like to sit like a zombie in front of TV. Everything else takes too much effort"
(Interview, Shaun).

Several participants used to be heavily involved in extracurricular activities, either in the junior school or at Intermediate school. For five of these participants, extracurricular involvement seems to have waned as they have grown older. Many parents and teachers

believe a lack of hobbies, interests and extra-curricular involvement may be contributing to their underachievement.

“Phillip has no hobbies or interests. He doesn’t even like kicking a ball around. He used to do heaps of stuff for the school – speech competitions and debating, but those have all lost his interest. He has nothing to keep him excited or interested anymore” (Interview, Phillip’s dad).

“There is a distinct lack of extra-curricular activities for many of my gifted students. This is concerning as they are not engaged with the school” (Interview, Jack, Matthew and Shaun’s English teacher).

Extra-curricular activities and wider contributions to the school are seen as essential ways of keeping students engaged with the school. These students do not seem to have any connection or involvement with their school outside of the classroom. This may fuel their disengagement and underachievement, as they do not feel involved or engaged. This poses another challenge for educators; we need to ensure our gifted students are active participants of the school community, but how can we do this in meaningful ways that will excite and interest the students?

Max and Jordan seemed to be the only exception to this generalisation, as both of these students were heavily involved with sports, both in and out of school. However, a strong commitment to sports and the time demands of these seem to be having a negative impact on achievement for both these students. For both of these students, sporting commitments

was leading to time away from school. Jordan, who is heavily involved in cultural activities, is also missing class time due to these commitments. For both Max and Jordan, it was observed that their sporting and cultural endeavours seemed to take priority over academic achievement. Teachers also commented that for both students, the threat of staying in at lunchtime or after school was enough of a threat to make them complete the work, as both students were concerned about missing their lunchtime or after school sports games.

5.8 Perfectionism and Deadlines

One of the most common recurring topics in the research was perfectionism. According to parents, teachers and students themselves, many of the participants demonstrate a strong perfectionist tendency in English. Joe's English teacher states that he has a desire for perfectionism. According to her, he has insightful ideas and produces very thorough essays that are usually five to seven pages in length. This is exceptional, especially considering the rest of the class produce essays that are one to two pages in length. However according to his English teacher, Joe is unwilling to hand in his essays if he believes they are below his potential or inferior to what he believes he can achieve.

"On one occasion Joe completed a twelve page essay discussing the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Unfortunately it ended up in the bin because Joe didn't believe it was good enough. Never mind the fact that it was well in excess of anything his friends can produce, Joe was unhappy with it and therefore it was not submitted....Joe ended up with a 'Not Achieved' grade for that unit" (Interview, Joe's English teacher).

Jack shows a similar tendency in English. In his recent Creative Writing assessment, Jack produced a short story that was 25 pages long. The expectation was for a story in the region of 500-1000 words. According to Jack's English teacher, he was engaged in the task and appeared to want to prove what he was capable of. He received an 'Excellence' for this assessment and his teacher suggested this piece of Creative Writing would probably have passed at a year 12 standard. However, when asked to produce a speech, Jack had seven different topics and began writing his speech several times, but was unable to produce anything for which he was happy. According to his English teacher, pages and pages of speech introductions ended up in the rubbish bin. When it came to the actual speech, Jack refused to do it, stating that he hadn't produced anything that was "good enough". When 'forced' to stand up and present his speech, Jack decided to do an impromptu speech, rather than read what he had produced that he had decided was not good enough. He received a 'Not Achieved' grade for this assessment. Jack was willing to forfeit a grade for this assessment rather than to present something he believed was below his capabilities.

According to Shaun's English teacher and father, he is also a perfectionist in English. Shaun struggles to meet deadlines, as he aims for perfection in his work. In an interview, Shaun's English teacher spoke of his tendency to work on one paragraph of writing for at least four periods, perfecting it until he was happy with it.

"It is absolutely incredible watching Shaun write an essay. He will work on one paragraph for four periods, perfecting every single word. He refuses to move on to the next paragraph until he is completely happy with what he has written" (Interview, Shaun's English teacher).

Shaun's desire to perfect his work results in incomplete work and 'Not Achieved' grades. However, when questioned about this, Shaun appears perfectly content continuing to do this. He shows a compulsion to complete work that is perfect rather than complete. Unfortunately this means that Shaun misses many deadlines. Shaun jokes about this, stating that deadlines are his biggest impediment to success.

"If there were no deadlines I would probably be the top student in English. But what do teachers want – rushed work that is finished or quality work? If you ask me, quality is much better than quantity" (Interview, Shaun).

This perfectionist tendency was seen across most of the participants. Students such as Phillip, Matiu, Joe and Wiremu would rather receive a 'Not Achieved' grade for work they had not submitted than hand in something that is below their potential. On the Heacox questionnaire, participants were given the statement "In order to get something done, I may settle for less than my best". The median response for this item was 1.8 (disagree), suggesting that these gifted students would rather hand in nothing at all than something below their potential.

5.9 Teachers' Opinions of Students

Another major factor impacting on the achievement of these students is the English teacher and their opinion of the student. Eight participants wanted their English teacher to know they were gifted.

“Yeah, I am gifted in English. I’ve always secretly known it, but I don’t think many other people would believe it. In a way, I wish you could wear some kind of label that says ‘gifted’ so that teachers would stop treating you like a cabbage. That would be heaps easier – if teachers just knew I was gifted, then I wouldn’t have to keep proving myself” (Interview, Phillip).

Some participants believed their teachers knew they were gifted, whereas others believed their teachers had “no idea” of their true level of ability. There seemed to be no general reasoning behind whether or not students revealed their gifts to their English teacher.

Some were very forthcoming, ensuring their parents and teachers knew they were gifted.

Some, like Max and Brad, have gone ‘underground’ as gifted students for some time, hiding their gifts from everyone. Others, such as Joe, Matthew and Jordan seem very concerned about their peers’ opinion of them. These students did not want to be identified as a gifted student in case their friends found out. Students believed the stereotype of intelligent students was uncomplimentary. However, other participants wanted their teachers to know, but wanted this to be kept quiet from their friends. Other participants wanted their teachers to know, but were concerned this would lead to extra work or more pressure, so were unwilling to reveal their true potential. This wide and diverse range of opinions and beliefs was very evident in the interviews and questionnaires.

However, there was some similarity among the participants. All ten participants were concerned about what their teachers thought of their ability, particularly if this would result in work that was too boring or easy. All ten participants were very vocal in stating that they

wanted work that was more challenging, interesting, motivating and/or relevant. However, all ten participants were also aware that their teachers needed to know their true ability level in order to provide this interesting work. One participant suggested this was a “chicken and egg” scenario. He believed that in order for more interesting work to be provided, he would have to perform so that his teacher was aware of his talents.

Teachers also spoke openly about this ‘chicken and egg’ scenario and explained the challenge from their point of view. For many of these teachers, these participants were producing little to no work in class. The work they were completing was often far below what was expected. In these cases, teachers were unwilling to provide these students with interesting, challenging, demanding or independent work if the students could not complete this easier work first. Teachers appeared to need ‘proof’ of competence and ability before more challenging work was provided. This creates a conflict between the student and teacher. Some of these students are unwilling to work to their potential for several different reasons. Therefore, they will continue to be given easier work. This does indeed seem to be a ‘chicken and egg’ scenario.

5.10 Variety

Variety within the classroom and in activities was one of the most common themes in the interviews and questionnaires. From the ten participants there was a resounding demand for more variety in the English classroom.

"Some of my teachers give me individual projects to work on. I love this, cos I can work at my own pace and focus on something that interests me and motivates me. When our class studied short stories, I did a poetry unit and studied the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and even wrote my own poetry. I will always remember that and I learned heaps" (Interview, Jack).

"Working on my own thing. One of my teachers gave me this activity sheet and I could pick my own activities. That was great because I did lots of visual activities which helped me practice my art skills. Anything that gives you a bit of choice is cool" (Interview, Max).

"If I get bored or frustrated in Biology I'm allowed to go and work on my Science Fair project. I really appreciate my teacher allowing me to do that" (Interview, Joe).

Many participants, their teachers and parents suggested a lack of variety was one of the most common causes of disengagement and underachievement. Students stated they quickly became bored by too much written work. Students also stated they found it hard to sit still and concentrate at a desk for long periods of time. Teachers also supported this finding, stating that gifted students struggled to focus on writing tasks for long periods of time. Parents and students requested a greater variety in teaching methods, including more computer time, movement outside the classroom and more kinaesthetic and visual activities. These gifted students often have great energy and enthusiasm and need to be kept engaged through a variety of teaching methods.

In the interviews and questionnaires, it was revealed that many of these students have a particular strength for oral language. Students such as Phillip, Shaun, Joe, Jordan, Jack and Matthew all excel in classroom debates, discussions and oral group work. These students also gain excellent results in speech assessments. Teachers commented that students often “came alive” and were animated in oral language work. Many of the students commented that speeches, debating and discussing ideas were some of their favourite things in English.

“I love talking about stuff and discussing topics. Debating is also really fun. I just hate it when you have to copy down notes” (Interview, Jordan).

It was suggested on various occasions that more oral assessment may help these students to achieve. Parents believed that if we gave these students more opportunities to demonstrate their learning through oral language, that they would be capable of demonstrating their abilities.

“I would like to see more oral assessment in the English classroom. This is Shaun’s strength. He doesn’t often get his ideas down on paper, but he will always express these ideas in discussions” (Interview, Shaun’s dad).

“Speaking, listening and conversation are Jack’s speciality. It is a shame there is not more of this in English. When he expresses his ideas verbally I am blown away” (Interview, Jack’s dad).

“Jordan was brought up to communicate orally. This is his strength. I would like to see him using more opportunities to demonstrate his learning through his language” (Interview, Jordan’s Koro).

The students communicated a strong desire to participate in more oral work. Through comments in the interviews and questionnaires, it became very apparent that many students believe there is too much reading and writing in English. They would like more opportunities to express their ideas in visual ways and in particular oral ways.

"If I could just tell my teacher what I thought, I'm sure I could pass. There is way too much writing in English and I never get my essays finished. But give me an opportunity to tell you what I know, and I'm sure I could impress you" (Interview, Shaun).

Similarly, teachers believed their students would have more chance of success if they could have more opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge through oral discussions and interviews. Many teachers expressed frustration that their students were so able orally, but did not pass the standard as they were not able to communicate their ideas in a written form.

"I've decided I need a tape recorder in my classroom. You should hear what Brad says sometimes. He really understands what we are doing, despite his reluctance to complete written work. I feel so frustrated. Because he doesn't write his ideas down, he doesn't pass the assessment. Do you think NZQA would accept a taped recording of his ideas rather than a written essay (laughs)?" (Interview, Brad's English teacher).

Once again, the limitations of NCEA make this very difficult. Under the current regulations and standards, students need to demonstrate their learning through writing and in particular essays. If students are unable to do this, they do not pass the assessment.

Currently, the only assessments in English that assess other learning methods are Speeches (oral language) and Static Images (Visual language), although Achievement Standard Static Image does not go beyond NCEA Level One.

5.11 Group Work

Another common theme arising from the interviews and questionnaires was group work. According to the student participants, teachers often utilise group work in the classroom as a technique of engaging students in their learning, and as a way for students to be able to learn from others. Many teachers in the interviews commented that they used group work in the classroom as a way of utilising the gifted students, so they could teach others who were working a level below them. However, when asked about group work, all ten participants stated that they did not enjoy it for varying reasons. In fact, many students demonstrated a passionate hatred for group work. It appears that group work, which is being used as a tool to engage students, may actually be leading to disengagement and underachievement for these gifted students.

Students demonstrated two tactics when working in groups. The first was sitting back and doing nothing, while leaving the group to complete the work. Students chose to disengage from their group because the work was too easy, they were frustrated by the task, or they did not see any point in contributing. There seemed to also be a belief that they could get away with not doing any work, as the other members of the group would cover for their lack of effort. The second tactic is taking over and doing all the work themselves. Students

chose to take over the group for similar reasons, including frustration with the level of the work and frustration with the ability of their group. Some students stated that they could not stand working at such a slow pace, so would rather complete all of the work on their own.

"I love group work. Nah, not really, but it's cool cos when we've got group work I get to sit back and do nothing. I usually just play on my phone under the desk. I'm not working with other people, especially people I don't like. They do it all wrong and don't even get my ideas so I just give up" (Interview, Wiremu).

"I absolutely hate group work. Why do teachers insist on making us work in groups? I always end up doing all the work for the whole group but everyone gets the credit" (Interview, Joe).

"Working in groups is the worst thing. Sometimes I just take over and do it all myself, but sometimes the other students insist on doing it their way. I get really embarrassed by what they are producing so I just decide to sit back so I'm no part of the finished product" (Interview, Phillip).

"In groups I either do it all myself or do nothing at all" (Interview, Shaun).

Students also expressed a passionate dislike of helping other students. Students believe that helping struggling students is a waste of learning time and is frustrating. Rather than learning from this experience, students seem to become more frustrated and disengaged.

"Group work. Ah! I can't stand it. I just let my group do all the work then pretend I'm helping when the teacher comes around. And the other thing – why do teachers always

make us help dumb students? My teacher says to me – ‘you are really good at this. I want you to work with blah blah to help them’. As if! That’s their job. I don’t get paid to do this stuff” (Interview, Jack).

Group work appears to be another factor contributing to disengagement, frustration and ultimately underachievement for these students. Clearly students would rather spend their time working on more challenging, independent work than contributing to group work.

5.12 Summary

In this chapter, the profiles have been closely examined to uncover common causes of underachievement amongst the ten participants. The National Certificate of Educational Achievement and its implementation within New Zealand secondary schools was a common topic of concern amongst all participants, their teachers and their parents. It is apparent that the current way in which this qualification is delivered is un-motivating to our gifted students. This will be examined in further detail in the following chapter.

Issues within the classroom were discussed, in particular students’ desire for variety, their dislike of group work, and teachers’ opinions of students. Although these are a unique group of students, their desire for choice, variety and independence within the classroom was unanimous. These students prefer to work independently, rather than in groups, and want to be given challenging, motivating work by their teachers. These students want to

have their gifts recognised by their teachers and to be given appropriately challenging and relevant work. This was a common theme among all ten participants and a strong message for educators. Perfectionism and deadlines were discussed as a common concern among students. Perfectionist tendencies are causing some of these students to miss deadlines or to fail assessments. The literature has revealed that perfectionism is a common trait amongst gifted students that is obviously having a detrimental effect on their achievement. This will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

As well as discussion of academic achievement, more personal issues were raised that contribute to underachievement. Concern for welfare was demonstrated in several profiles. Drug and alcohol use were mentioned, as was withdrawal and disengagement in the classroom. Lack of attendance was also a significant issue raised for many students (particularly in the senior school). The students' lack of contribution to extracurricular activities and their lack of hobbies and interests was also an issue raised for many students, and a possible contributor to their disengagement from school.

The next chapter examines these issues in relation to the literature and makes suggestions and recommendations to educators.

Chapter Six: Discussion

This research has opened up a wealth of information for educators, parents and students themselves. It has identified some of the contributors to underachievement for these gifted male students. However, it has also revealed many areas that need further investigation and questioning. In order to meet the needs of these students, changes to current practice need to be made. It is important to examine each of the following areas - deadlines and perfectionism, variety, parenting, level of work and the implications of this study for future research - in order to ensure the needs of our gifted students are being met, and so that they can begin to achieve to their potential. In this chapter, these issues are discussed in relation to gifted literature and suggestions and recommendations are made for educators.

6.1 Deadlines and Perfectionism

In the interviews, many participants expressed a strong tendency towards perfectionism. Students were more likely not to hand in something than hand in something that may be below their abilities. This is having a significant impact on the achievement record for many participants. For all ten participants, their academic records revealed that many assessments were 'Not Submitted' or 'Incomplete'. This supports the comments made by students that they prefer not to hand in work that is below their capability. For all ten participants, it was revealed that they had problems meeting deadlines. Comments made by students suggested deadlines were one of the largest contributors to their underachievement in English. As Shaun explained in his interview, *"Don't always insist on deadlines. I will get stuff done if you just give me a bit more time"*.

A strong link can be drawn between perfectionism and the meeting of deadlines. For many of these students, their unwillingness to hand in work that was not perfect was resulting in work not being submitted by the deadline. This supports the findings of Schultz and Delisle (2003) and Alvino (1991) who state that perfectionist tendencies can place gifted students under great stress, particularly when faced with tight deadlines. The studies of Schultz and Delisle (2003) suggest that students would prefer to fail an assessment rather than hand in something below their abilities. Alvino (1991) believes deadlines place gifted boys in an environment of high stress, competition and pressure that is detrimental to their achievement. This is a difficult challenge for both participants and educators. Many participants suggested that if there were no deadlines or a reduction in pressure, they would be able to produce work to an acceptable level and achieve. However, in schools, and particularly under the restrictions of NCEA, deadlines are an essential mechanism for ensuring students stay on task and have the same conditions as other students.

Many participants suggested that having no deadlines for completion of work would help them to achieve to a higher level. Students such as Joe and Shaun believed perfection of work was more important than meeting deadlines, and therefore they would rather produce good quality work than rush work to meet deadlines. Interestingly, many English teachers also suggested their students' achievement was being impacted by a need to meet deadlines. The teachers believed that a lack of deadlines, or flexibility of deadlines, may help these students to achieve to a higher level.

However, many educationalists, such as Kerr and Cohn (2001) and Kanevsky and Keighley (2003), believe that procrastination is a major impediment to the achievement of gifted students. These educationalists believe that students often procrastinate and put work off until the last minute, usually because it is considered too easy or too boring. Removing deadlines from our gifted students may only add to the tendency towards procrastination.

Removing deadlines would have great consequences for educators, and, potentially, their students. Under the current NCEA system, it is essential to have deadlines. Deadlines for work submission ensure students are making progress and are on target to complete all work for the year. If deadlines were removed for these students, it could potentially contribute even further to their underachievement, as they may be less motivated to complete work. They may also complete less work if the pressure to meet deadlines was removed. Most importantly, deadlines are enforced to ensure all students complete assessments under the same conditions. If these students were to have more time to complete their assessments than other students, it could cause unequal assessment conditions, making the assessment invalid.

In an ideal world, these students would have all the time they need to perfect their assessments and complete them to their capabilities. However, this seems almost impossible under the current NCEA system, unless the entire system were to be reviewed. Students may also be capable of meeting deadlines if class periods were extended beyond one hour. Blocks of time (for example two or three periods in a row) may help engage

students in their learning and help them complete assessments. This is clearly one area that needs review and consideration.

6.2 National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA)

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and its implementation in our secondary schools was a common topic in the interviews. As discussed in the previous chapter, parents and their sons had concerns about the strict way in which NCEA is currently conducted. They believed that students are denied opportunities to have choice, variety and independence in their learning. Parents were also concerned that students were able to 'pick and choose' assessments, believing that this required students to make mature choices of which they were not always capable. The research of Meyer et al. (2006) supports the concerns of parents, stating that students are required to make mature choices regarding NCEA and assessments that may have a significant impact on their careers.

Participants believed students were not able to have their individual needs met in the method in which NCEA is currently being conducted and offered to students. The research of Zepke et al. (2005) suggests that standards-based assessment has the potential to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners. However, their studies highlight the fact that the current implementation of NCEA is not meeting the needs of all students, particularly those at the top and bottom ends of the spectrum. Zepke et al. (2005) recommend further research into this area to ensure the needs of gifted students are being met in the current

qualification system. The comments by parents and students enforce the idea that the current implementation of NCEA is not adequately meeting the needs of gifted students.

All six participants who are currently studying towards NCEA appear de-motivated by the NCEA system, particularly the credit system. Currently students receive the same amount of credits for an 'Achieved' grade as a 'Merit' or 'Excellence' grade. Parents and teachers expressed concerns in the interviews that these six students are not motivated to aim for the higher grades and are only aiming for 'Achieved'. Parents and teachers are concerned that this credit system is encouraging students to aim low. Meyer et al. (2006) also believe that standards-based assessment is de-motivating for gifted students. Their research highlighted the fact that students are un-motivated to aim for more than the minimum number of credits (80) and are unlikely to aim for 'Merit' and 'Excellence' grades. Recently NCEA has made changes to the system so that students are awarded their certificates with 'Achieved', 'Merit' or Excellence, depending on their academic records. The intention of this change was to reward and acknowledge high achievers and to provide more motivation within the NCEA system. However, there has been no change to the current system that gives students the same number of credits for an 'Achieved' grade as for an 'Excellence' grade. An examination of participants' results reveals that they are gaining mostly 'Achieved' grades. It appears that the concerns of parents and teachers are confirmed; these six participants are only aiming for 'Achieved'. Adaptations will need to be made to NCEA and its credit system to ensure the adequate motivation of gifted students.

6.3 Variety, Choice and Independence

One of the most common topics of discussion throughout the questionnaires and interviews was the need for variety, choice and independence in learning. Students expressed a strong desire to have more variety in their English classrooms. They desired to learn through a variety of teaching methods, particularly more kinaesthetic, visual and oral learning opportunities. Many participants and their parents believed there was too much emphasis on writing in the English classroom, and these students need to be exposed to a wider variety of teaching and learning methods in order to stay engaged. Studies conducted by Fehrenback (1993) illustrate that choice, variety and differentiation are the most successful strategies employed by schools to engage gifted students. The comments by participants and their parents confirm Fehrenback's studies and highlight the importance of providing choice and variety for gifted students.

Students and their parents also expressed a strong desire for students to have more choice and independence in their learning. Students spoke animatedly about assessments that allowed them to pick their own topics, learning methods and presentation styles. Parents seemed disappointed that this type of independent assessment was not readily available within NCEA. Students believed choosing their own topics and activities, while working at their own pace, would help them to be more interested and engaged in their own learning. These findings support the work of Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) who state that students face a reduction in choice, complexity, challenge and control in secondary schools. They believe this lack of choice and independence is a major contributing factor to

underachievement in secondary schools. This is further supported by the comments from participants and their parents, as shown in the results chapter.

For educators, the parent and student comments are a rare insight into what gifted students really want in the classroom. These students want independent work in which they can choose their own activities and tailor their learning to their own interests and needs.

However, these students also want guidelines, regulations, support and progress checks.

Many participants commented that they found big projects overwhelming and they often lost their motivation. With support and feedback from a teacher, independent projects may be an effective way in which to meet the needs of gifted students. They can accelerate their own learning, choose a topic area that interests them and learn in ways that will keep them engaged. A generic independent assessment activity may require minimal preparation from a teacher. However, it may become difficult to incorporate these independent projects into NCEA. Once again, this is an area that needs more thought and investigation to make these types of activities working under NCEA regulations.

Participants and their parents expressed that there was too much focus on writing assessments in English. Eight out of ten NCEA assessments require students to present their ideas in essay or short answer form. Therefore, in order to succeed in English, students are required to spend most of their class time writing and preparing for written examinations.

However, many of these participants have strengths in other learning methods, particularly oral language. Parents, teachers and students all expressed a desire for students to be assessed in ways other than writing: .powerpoint presentations, websites, plays, posters

and discussions were all ideas students presented that they would like to use to demonstrate their learning. As discussed in previous sections, many of these students have a particular talent for oral language and communicating their ideas through discussion. Students were passionate about the idea of presenting their learning through discussion. English teachers also believed their students would be capable of greater success if they could demonstrate their learning through discussion or taped interviews.

Comments by participants and their parents support the assertions of Karnes and Stephens (2005) who believe product choice is one of the most effective strategies in gifted education. Karnes and Stephens state that gifted students should be given a choice of product in which to present their knowledge. By providing some element of choice in the design of the product, Karnes and Stephens believe gifted students are able to take control of their own learning and become more engaged in their learning. They suggest that students should be given many product options that span the different learning methods; oral, visual, written, performance and multi-categorical.

Although this is an exciting idea and highly possible within a junior classroom, oral and visual assessment methods are almost impossible in the current NCEA educational system. It may be possible to utilise discussions, oral presentations and computer work in learning activities, but students will still be required to present their learning in writing, often under exam conditions. There is also a concern that if too much emphasis is placed on 'other' learning methods in the junior school, students will not be adequately prepared for their writing assessments in the senior school. At this stage, it appears it is not possible to allow

students to be assessed through other visual or oral mediums in the senior school, but these activities should be promoted within the classroom. This is an area that needs further investigation and research, as oral and visual assessment may become possible in time.

Many students expressed frustration that their texts were dated, boring and had little interest or relevance to the student. Participants believed more modern, interesting and challenging literature would help them to achieve better results in English, which is highly possible. However, this may prove difficult for some teachers who enjoy teaching classic literature through traditional methods or who are reluctant to develop new teaching resources for new literature. A possible solution to this problem is allowing gifted students to choose their own texts to study while the rest of the class studies the same novel. Students could also study the same text as the rest of the class, but could be provided with differentiated learning activities. This does not necessarily require more work from the teacher. Students can have a generic study outline that shows students which areas they need to cover, including characters, themes, relationships, conflict, setting and symbols. There are many generic activities that allow students to explore novels of their choice. This may also be a way in which to meet the needs of a mixed ability class – giving all students choice in their text, while providing scaffolding generic activities that guide them through the study. Providing gifted students with some choice in their texts may help to engage them in their learning and advance their knowledge.

6.4 Parents

Although the aim of this research was to uncover information about the students, many important aspects were revealed about the parents and the support they may need from educators. Throughout the interviews it became very apparent that parents were aware that their sons were gifted, often from an early age. Regardless of whether their sons had been professionally tested or identified as gifted by the school, parents seemed confident in their beliefs that their sons were gifted. Parents stated they suspected their sons were different from an early age, commenting on their advanced progress in developmental milestones, their curiosity, early reading and communication abilities and their ability to communicate with adults.

Even though students may presently be underachieving, parents were often able to cite evidence to support their sons' giftedness, including competitions they had won, work samples that demonstrated their ability, or formative assessment results. These parents are confident and reliable identifiers of giftedness. This confirms the findings of Cathcart (2005) who believes parents are the most reliable and honest source of identification. Moltzen (2004) also believes that parents are knowledgeable sources of information and can provide teachers with valuable information about a student's abilities. This has implications for educators, as parents can become a reliable source for identifying gifted students.

Unfortunately parents often expressed great frustration about their sons' giftedness and underachievement. Parents seemed confused, frustrated and concerned about their sons' underachievement but were unsure about what to do or where to go for help. Knowing that their sons were gifted and capable of excelling seemed to contribute to this sense of frustration. Parents expressed that they knew their sons should be succeeding but could not understand why they were currently underachieving. It is important to remember that parents also need support and education when dealing with a gifted student. The comments of these parents are an important reminder to educators that it is essential to ensure the needs of parents are being met, as well as the needs of their gifted children. Parents may need education, support, advice and guidance. For staff members dealing with gifted students, it may be helpful to meet with parents on a regular basis to inform them of progress, interventions and concerns.

One of the most concerning aspects of the interviews with parents was that they expressed a belief that their sons' needs could not be met in state secondary schools. Parents spoke animatedly about what their sons would need to achieve, including more independence, freedom, one-on-one tuition and variety. Unfortunately many parents believed this was not possible in their current school setting. Parents thought large class sizes and NCEA restrictions prevented their sons' needs from being met. Rather than being distressed or angry by this fact, many parents seemed very accepting, believing their sons would need to fit into a mainstream setting rather than the education being tailored to them.

Parents in this study were resigned to the fact that their sons' needs would not be met in their current school environments. Some parents expressed a desire to find private schooling for their son to ensure their needs were being met. Some parents expressed an interest in homeschooling. However, most parents were resigned to keeping their sons in the current school setting, with the expectation that their needs would not be met. It is with some urgency that educators find a way in which to meet the needs of students and parents within large, mixed ability secondary classrooms. This may be extremely difficult and challenging, but is essential in order to give hope to the students and their parents. Gifted students should not have to fit into our mainstream educational setting and education is not a 'one size fits all' approach. Appropriate provisions and interventions for these students need to be developed and provided within our state secondary schools. These interventions need to be communicated to parents and should involve strong parent-teacher partnerships.

6.5 Level of Work

All ten participants expressed a strong desire to have work that was more challenging, relevant and motivating. However, teachers expressed a differing point of view, stating that many students were unable to complete much easier work, so they felt reluctant to provide more challenging work. Teachers said they needed 'proof' the students could cope with the easier work before they were provided with something more difficult or interesting, while students said they were unwilling to complete easier work as it was too easy, un-motivating

and has no relevance. One participant referred to this as a “chicken and egg” situation.

It may become the responsibility of the teacher to solve this dilemma. Teachers of gifted students who are currently underachieving may need to take a chance by providing students with one challenging, interesting, motivating or independent assessment that is tailored to the needs of the student. Discussions about the importance of this assessment as a tool for demonstrating ability and trust would need to take place between the teacher and student before they begin. If the student fails to become engaged or motivated by this task, further discussions would have to occur between the teacher, student and possibly also the family. Hopefully by providing one of these types of activities or assessments, students will appreciate the gesture and take the opportunity to become engaged in their learning. There is no doubt that this will always be a challenge for teachers and students who are underachieving, but perhaps by giving our students a chance to prove themselves it may encourage them to achieve.

According to Reis and Purcell (1993), gifted students have already accomplished thirty-five to fifty percent of the skills they will be taught in a grade before entering it. Rimm (2003) states that gifted students are often working at least two grades above their current grade placement. Boredom is a significant issue for these gifted students. By utilising pre-assessment to determine their prior knowledge, the curricula can be individualised to avoid teaching students skills or knowledge they have already acquired. Pre-assessment and curriculum compacting will help eliminate boredom and can provide opportunities for students to begin working on more advanced topics. Curriculum compacting is a strategy

recommended by a number of educationalists to keep gifted students engaged (Fehrenback, 1993; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Rimm, 2003; Moltzen, 2004).

6.6 Extracurricular Involvement

One of the most unexpected findings of this study is in relation to extracurricular involvement. Educationalists such as Oblewski-Kubilius (2004) have found that gifted students are actively involved in extracurricular activities. Oblewski-Kubilius conducted studies of students that examined the extent of their hobbies, interests, and commitment to within-school and outside-school activities. She discovered that the majority of gifted students were extensively involved in extracurricular activities, usually related in some way to their area of talent. For some of these students, they were passionately involved in an interest or hobby. Similarly, extensive extracurricular involvement is listed as a 'characteristic' or 'identifier' of giftedness on many checklists of gifted behaviours. Educationalists such as Clark (2002), Cathcart (2005) and Lashlie (2005) identify an interest and involvement in extracurricular activities as a common characteristic of giftedness. Karnes and Riley (2005) state that gifted students enjoy competitions and willingly involve themselves in these competitions as a way of challenging themselves and gaining recognition for their talent.

However, for eight of the participants in this study, there was a distinct *lack* of involvement in extracurricular activities. Only two participants were involved in any sort of sport, club or

hobby. The other eight participants struggled to name any activities which they participated in within or outside of school. Some participants had recently entered competitions relating to English, however this was often at the insistence or recommendation of their teachers and/or parents.

Although this is in direct contrast to the findings of Oblewski-Kubilius, this may be a major cause of underachievement for these participants. It can be assumed that the students in Oblewski-Kubilius's research were largely successful gifted students. The contrast in these findings suggests that a lack of extracurricular activities is one of the many complex factors relating to underachievement for the students in this study. These students have a distinct lack of connect with their schools or communities. They also have no outlet for their area of talent. These findings suggest that involvement in extracurricular activities, particularly relating to an area of interest or talent, may be an essential component of success for gifted students. Guiding gifted students towards appropriate extracurricular activities or competitions could be a simple yet effective way for teachers to re-engage underachieving gifted students.

6.7 Gifted Maori Students

As identified by the Ministry of Education (2002), gifted Maori students are a unique group of students that have specific and individualised educational needs. However, the research conducted by Riley et al. (2004) highlighted the fact that the needs of all Maori students are not adequately being met in our New Zealand schools. Four gifted students in this study

identified themselves as Maori. Although this is not a large sample of students, these four students do provide an insight into gifted Maori education in one secondary school.

Not one of these four students had been identified as gifted by their English teachers. This supports the findings of Bevan-Brown (2009) who believes that teacher-nomination is ineffective in New Zealand schools as the majority of teachers are non-Maori and have limited understandings of Maori concepts of giftedness. However, the parents of all four students were confident when speaking about their sons' gifts and talents. This also supports the findings of Bevan-Brown (2009) who believes that parent-nomination can be one of the most effective methods of identification for gifted Maori students. It is important that relationships are built between the parents and teachers of these boys so that this valuable information can be passed on to the teachers (Bevan-Brown, 2009).

For one participant in particular (Jordan), his Koro had specific concerns that his cultural needs were not being met within the classroom. Jordan's Koro suggested that he would like his grandson to be given more leadership roles within the classroom and to be expected to serve others. These are cultural aspects that Jordan's Koro valued. Bevan-Brown (2009) states that intellectual and physical gifts are nurtured in New Zealand schools, but more attention needs to be given to affective traits (for example leadership, spirituality and understanding). Similarly, Matiu's mum also believed that her son would excel if given more leadership opportunities. It is possible that these Maori students are not achieving because they are not being given access to the culturally-responsive environment that Bevan-Brown believes is so important to Maori students.

All four gifted Maori participants had concerns about the literature they were studying. Comments made showed the students thought the texts were “boring”, dated and had little relevance. Bevan-Brown (2009) believes one of the most effective provisions for gifted Maori students is allowing them to study their own culture, or bringing their own culture into the classroom. She believes one of the ways this can happen is through studying prominent Maori people, or by studying Maori myths and legends or fictional books. All four participants demonstrated very little engagement with the texts they were currently studying in English. Allowing students to study texts about Maori culture or by Maori authors could be a simple yet effective way of engaging them in their learning.

All four Maori participants voiced a strong desire to participate in more oral learning. This was also supported by Jordan’s Koro and Wiremu’s mum. Matthew stated he would like to teach the class or present acts or skits to show his learning. Bevan-Brown (1993) states that oral learning is important and valued in the Maori community. Giving these students more discussion time or allowing them to present their findings in an oral way may be another effective way of providing these students with a more culturally-responsive environment.

Wiremu presents a unique insight into a gifted Maori student with severe behavioural problems. Wiremu’s challenging and aggressive behaviour has become so problematic that his learning has become seriously hindered. Bevan-Brown (1993) states that behavioural problems can often mask giftedness in Maori students, particularly when this behaviour is violent or aggressive. The teachers of Wiremu were very reluctant to see him as a gifted

student, and report comments suggested teachers had very low expectations for his academic achievement. This is a serious challenge for educators. As Bevan-Brown (1993) states, some Maori students can exhibit behavioural problems, but it is still important for the teachers to recognise the academic and cultural gifts of the student. If a culturally-appropriate and responsive environment could be created for Wiremu, he may begin to achieve to his potential.

6.8 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This research has examined the phenomenon of gifted underachievement from the perspective of ten participants, their English teachers and their families, from one secondary school in New Zealand. A profile has been created for each participant, detailing their gifts, talents and current achievement record. Detail has been provided to examine factors impeding their achievement in English. Suggestions have also been made to help these students succeed in a mainstream class. However, as with all research, this study has opened new areas for investigation.

Firstly, this research project has examined underachievement from the perspective of ten participants at one school. Every effort has been made to include a range of students, from years nine to ten, and from those who are passing in English to those who are seriously underachieving. Efforts have also been made to find students who show a diverse range of behaviours and attitudes. However, no attempt has been made to generalise from this

population of students to the entire population of gifted underachieving males. In order for conclusive findings to be drawn, this research needs to take place with a much larger sample of students from diverse locations, backgrounds, age groups and both genders. Only then can we begin to draw firm conclusions.

Secondly, the aim of this project was only to find possible reasons for underachievement and to examine the phenomenon in detail. No attempt has been made to trial or evaluate interventions. Many possible ideas and interventions have been suggested in this research and these need trialling and examination. These students are desperate for interventions to assist their achievement. Researching possible interventions and resources for gifted underachieving students is still an area that is underdeveloped and needs further research.

Another limitation of this research study was the role conflict. For practical reasons, ten participants were chosen from the one school. As the researcher for this study, I was also a teacher and the gifted and talented coordinator for the school. This created potential role conflict. Some of these participants were known to me prior to the research study. All precautions were taken to ensure I did not currently teach any of these students; however, I did have a pre-existing relationship with some of these participants (either as a teacher or as the gifted and talented coordinator). To encourage open and honest answers, students completed their questionnaires in the privacy of their homes and posted these back to the school. However, I did conduct the interviews with students which may have prevented students from being totally honest or forthcoming. To improve the validity of this research, the study should be repeated using a researcher and participants that were unknown to

each other. Involving participants from a greater range of schools would also contribute to the conclusiveness of these results.

Finally, this research report has raised many challenges. These include the possibility of visual and oral assessment, providing independent assessments within NCEA, and meeting the needs of parents of gifted students. All of these areas need thought, investigation and action. Clearly there are many inconsistencies between what these students and their parents require and what our secondary schools currently provide. Although no decisive answers have been provided to these questions within this research, all of these areas need further thought, questioning and investigation. This research has raised many difficult and perhaps almost impossible challenges for educators, but these students deserve the attention. We need to do everything within our power to meet these students' needs within our current educational settings.

6.6 Summary

English was considered the favourite subject for all ten participants. This is extremely heartening and encouraging for educators. Participants believed that English was one of the only subjects in which they are able to express themselves. Other participants stated that English was the only subject that allowed them to have their own opinions and beliefs. For some of the participants, English was the only subject that allowed them to use their creativity. Two participants stated that English was the only thing they looked forward to in

their school day. Parents supported their comments, stating that students had a love of reading and writing and talked excitedly about English.

However, despite their love of English, all ten participants are underachieving in English. For some students, this was their worst subject academically. This is concerning. These students have talents and gifts in English as have been documented, yet they cannot gain the results of which they are capable. Some participants are even failing the subject and struggling to gain the credits needed to pass, while students well below their ability are passing. Some participants are achieving in subjects they find difficult while they are underachieving in English. Our gifted students are the ones that should be excelling in English, yet all ten of these participants are currently underachieving. There are clearly impediments to their success in this subject.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

There is a clear discrepancy between male and female achievement in New Zealand secondary schools. Females are consistently outperforming males in NCEA statistics, Scholarship results and University Entrance. In particular, there seems to be an alarming discrepancy between male and female achievements in English at the secondary level. It is primarily our female students that are gaining 'Excellence' grades and Scholarship passes in English at the senior levels. This is extremely concerning. Where are our gifted male students who should be achieving at these levels? This research report set out to examine the phenomenon of gifted male students in English at the secondary level.

A survey of Heads of Departments of English in the Bay of Plenty region revealed that many of these teachers believe gifted underachievement in English is primarily a male phenomenon. These HODs could easily name several male students at their schools who were gifted but were currently achieving well below their potential. An examination of the 'gifted register' at the school revealed a similar trend. Eighteen male students were identified on the gifted register as being moderately to extremely gifted in English. Of these eighteen students, fourteen were considered to be underachieving in English. In contrast, sixteen female students were identified on the gifted register as having talents in English, but only one of these students was considered to be currently underachieving.

Underachievement among gifted males in English is considerably and alarmingly higher than female underachievement at this secondary school. This is possibly the case in secondary schools throughout the country, although this requires further investigation.

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of underachievement and its causes, a profile was built for each participant. Students, their parents and teachers were interviewed. Work samples, previous reports, formative test results and assessments results were all obtained. Once these profiles were established, it became clear that underachievement was indeed a very complex phenomenon. Some of the literature suggested that there were common characteristics and causes of underachievement. However, these profiles revealed ten very individual underachievers with unique characteristics and needs. It quickly became clear that there would be no quick, easy 'one size fits all' solution to underachievement. Instead, underachievement needs to be examined on an individual basis and appropriate interventions need to be trialled for each unique student.

Interestingly, although these students were unique and diverse, they shared many similar beliefs, attitudes and needs. This research report attempted to draw together these parallels and find similarities among the ten participants in order to provide some help and support to educators. Boredom, lack of interest and motivation, the de-motivating effects of NCEA, strict regulations of assessments and large class sizes were all highlighted as contributors to the students' underachievement. Participants expressed a desire for more choice, variety, independence, and to learn through a variety of learning methods. Variety seems to be the key to motivating these gifted students to achieve to their potential. Participants' individual requests varied, but they expressed a desire to demonstrate their learning through a variety of different learning methods. Participants wanted to learn outside the classroom, engage in more oral discussions, spend more time working on

computers and to undertake independent projects covering topics of interest.

English was considered the favourite subject for all 10 participants. This is extremely heartening and encouraging for educators. Participants believed that English was one of the only subjects in which they are able to express themselves. Other participants stated that English was the only subject that allowed them to have choice, opinions and beliefs. For some of the participants, English was the only subject that allowed them to use their creativity. Two participants stated that English was the only thing they looked forward to in their school day. Parents supported their comments, stating that students had a love of reading and writing and talked excitedly about English.

However, despite their love of English, all ten participants are underachieving in English. For some students, this was their worst subject academically. This is concerning. These students have incredible talents and gifts in English as have been documented, yet they cannot gain the results of which they are capable. Some participants are even failing the subject and struggling to gain the credits needed to pass, while students well below their ability are passing. Our gifted students are the ones that should be excelling in English, yet all ten of these participants are currently underachieving. There are clearly impediments to their success in this subject.

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) appears to have had a dramatic impact on the achievement of six of these students. Parents and students spoke positively about the choice, variety and independence offered in the junior school (years nine and

ten). However, many of the participants and their parents expressed frustration and disappointment that this same level of variety could not be offered in the senior school due to the regulations and requirements of NCEA. For all six participants, the demands of NCEA were considered a reason for their underachievement. Participants stated they were 'forced' to study topics and texts that were of no interest to them. The strict regulations, requirements and deadlines of NCEA were all listed as factors that impeded the achievement of gifted students in English. In particular, the requirement for students to thoroughly develop and explain their ideas within writing was mentioned on several occasions as an impediment to students' success. Teachers, parents and students all believed males were unfairly disadvantaged by the necessity to develop ideas in detail within a piece of writing. Students stated they found it unnecessary and difficult to explain their ideas in detail, however this was a requirement for 'Merit' and 'Excellence' grades.

All six participants who are currently studying towards NCEA are de-motivated by the NCEA system. All participants are aiming for a minimum number of credits, are opting out of particular standards, and seem reluctant to aim for 'Merit' and 'Excellence' grades. The fact that 'Achieved' grades are worth the same amount of credits as higher grades has had a significant impact on the participants. All six participants show no willingness to aim for the higher grades. We need to investigate an alternative assessment system for our gifted students or to find ways in which to meet their unique needs within our current system.

The implications for educators are far and wide-reaching. Unfortunately this research report has highlighted many issues and challenges for educators, including the requirement

to provide interest, motivation and choice for gifted students within the restraints of our current assessment system. This research report has also highlighted the importance of working with parents as well as students to improve achievement. Parents and whanau need to be kept in close contact and consultation in regards to their sons' achievement. Gifted education needs to be a three-way triangle, including the student, their teacher and their parent(s). It is clear that there is no easy, quick fix solution to help our gifted underachievers in English. However, these profiles have provided a valuable insight into the needs and requirements of our gifted students. Further investigation, research and trialling of interventions will provide further insights into how we can meet the needs of these complex students.

Kerr and Cohn (2001) believe that our educational system continually de-emphasises talent, focusing instead on raising the basic levels of academic achievement. This research report highlights the fact that these gifted students need individualised attention and appropriate provisions. Despite beliefs that gifted students will achieve on their own, these ten gifted students are obviously not achieving in our current educational system. These students require personalised, relevant and motivating curricula that provide them with the opportunity to achieve to their potential. Gifted students deserve this attention.

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Appendix A: Letter of Consent – Principal and Board of Trustees

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

CONSENT FROM SCHOOL

I am currently enrolled in the Master of Education programme at Massey University. To complete my Thesis component of this qualification, I am planning a research study that will be conducted at **** School in 2009. The title of this project is “Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement”. The purpose of this research study is to examine ten gifted students in English who are considered to be underachieving in this subject. The aim of this study is to build full profiles of these students including information about their behaviours, attitudes, opinions, characteristics and abilities. These gifted males are the students who should be gaining our highest marks in English, yet so many are achieving below their potential. By building a full profile of these students, I hope to draw conclusions about ways in which we can better meet the needs of these students.

Full written consent will be gained from the school, student participants, their parents and their teachers before any research is begun. I have included copies of the information sheets and consent forms which will be distributed to parents, teachers and student participants. The school will not be named at any point in this research study. All participants, their parents and teachers will also remain anonymous. All identifying information will be removed from sources of data and transcripts of interviews. Maintaining confidentiality and safety is of the utmost importance in this research study.

As this project involves young participants and my own students, I am completing a Massey University Human Ethics Committee application. This application requires me to examine all possible causes of harm or discomfort. I will advise you as to the result of this application as soon as possible. I am being supervised by two staff members from Massey University (Tracy Riley and Sally Hansen) who have extensive experience in conducting and overseeing research. I have included their contact details on the information sheet. Please feel free to contact them if you have any questions.

Please feel free to ask for any further information concerning this research study. It is my intention to be open and honest with the school throughout this research project. Thank you very much for considering this application.

Appendix B: Authority for Release of School Records

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

Authority to Access Databases

This form will be held for a period of five (5) years

This letter is to gain consent to the school databases for the purpose of my research study.

From March –June 2009, I will require access to the following databases:

- The school's Gifted Register – to obtain names and information about potential participants in the study.
- Kamar – to gain previous school reports and assessment results for students.
- Students' portfolios of work. I will approach teachers to gain work samples and assessment results for student participants.
- STAR (English) results for the whole school. These results may be used to help me identify potential participants, and to gauge the ability level of my participants.

Once I have obtained these records, they will be photocopied. All names and identifying information will be removed immediately. All work samples, assessment results and reports will be held in a locked filing cabinet that is not accessible by anyone else.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors. If you are happy for me to have access to the above databases, please read the following statement and sign below.

For the period March – June 2009, I agree to allow the researcher access to the following databases to gain information for her research study: Gifted Register, STAR assessment results, Kamar for reports and assessment results, and student portfolios of work.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name – Printed: _____

Appendix C: Information Letter for School, Teachers and Parents

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

INFORMATION SHEET (For parents, teachers, Principal, and Board of Trustees)

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study concerning the achievement of gifted males in secondary school English. The purpose of this study is to uncover reasons for the underachievement of gifted boys in English. A profile of these students will be created using observations, interviews, analyses of work samples and assessment results, and questionnaires. The parents/caregivers and teachers of these students will also be interviewed so that a full understanding of the needs of these students can be gained. The aim of this study is to fully understand the needs, behaviours and characteristics of gifted males in English, so that schools and teachers can better cater to the needs of our gifted male students.

I am the researcher for this study. I am currently an English teacher and the GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) Coordinator at *** High School. If you have any questions, I can be contacted using the following details:

Two supervisors from Massey University have been provided to help oversee this research project. Tracy Riley and Sally Hansen are both lecturers at the University and have extensive experience in the areas of gifted education and males in English. They also have extensive experience with conducting and overseeing research. They can be contacted on the details provided below.

Tracey Riley
Massey University Department of Education
Hokowhitu Campus, Palmerston North
Phone: (06) 356 9099 ext 8625
T.L.Riley@massey.ac.nz

Sally Hansen
Massey University Department of Education
Hokowhitu Campus, Palmerston North
Phone: (06) 356 9099 ext 8705
S.E.Hansen@massey.ac.nz

Participant Recruitment

Ten students will be chosen to participate in this research project – two from each year level of secondary education (years 9 to 13). Participants will be selected because they have been identified as being gifted in English or having a particular talent for English. A gifted student will be defined as those with exceptional abilities relative to most other people (Ministry of Education, 2002). Due to the age of students, I require the consent of both the participant and their parent/caregiver(s) in order for the student to participate. If the parent/caregiver(s) does not consent, the student will not be able to participate.

For the purposes of this study, participants will be selected because they are considered to be 'underachieving' in English. Underachievement is defined as "a discrepancy between the child's school performance and some index of his or her actual ability such as intelligence, achievement, creativity, scores, or observational data" (Davis & Rimm, 1998, p.279).

Therefore participants will be those who have shown immense talent in English but are gaining results well below their capabilities. For some students, this may mean they are gaining 'Merit' results when they are capable of 'Excellence', however for other students this may mean that they are failing in English. I am concerned that there are barriers preventing students from gaining the success they deserve – whether these barriers are curriculum-based, or the way in which the students are learning. The purpose of this study is to identify these barriers to achievement, so that we can help give these students the education they need and deserve.

Participant Involvement

The aim of this study is to build a rich, full profile of these gifted students. I will interview these students, their teachers and their parents. These interviews will each take approximately one hour and will be held in a confidential room at *** School. A teacher from *** School who has completed postgraduate study will conduct the interviews. For parents, these interviews can take place over the phone if you prefer. The questions will ask about the achievements, behaviours, attitudes and opinions of the students. The aim of these interviews is to find ways in which to better meet the needs of these students.

I will collect other sources of data from each participant including work samples, previous school reports and assessment results. These pieces of data will allow me to analyse their current achievements and to gauge their ability level. All identifying information on these pieces of work will be removed. Student participants will also be asked to complete questionnaires in the privacy of their own home which will give more information about their learning preferences. Student participants will be required to give two hours of their time to this project - to participate in an interview and to complete a questionnaire.

Project Procedures

Once the data has been collected, I will be analysing the results to draw conclusions about the needs of these students. I will create a full profile for each student which will detail their behaviours, characteristics, opinions, attitudes and abilities. Conclusions will focus on meeting the needs of these students, and what schools and teachers could do to support the achievement of our gifted students. A summary of the research findings will be made available to all participants at the conclusion of the study.

Anonymity of all participants is of the utmost importance in this research project. All identifying information on work samples and reports will immediately be removed. Interviews will be taped and transcribed, but all identifying information will be destroyed. Participants, their teachers and their parents will not be named at any point and are ensured of their full anonymity. All data and consent forms will be kept in locked filing cabinets which cannot be accessed by anyone except myself.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question
- Withdraw from the study by August 2009
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded
- Ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the interview

Support Processes

If you feel uncomfortable at any stage about participating in this research project, you have the right to withdraw. If you would like further information or support, you can contact the researcher or the researcher supervisors. All contact details are provided on the front page.

Appendix D: Information Letter for Student Participants

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

INFORMATION SHEET (For student participants)

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study concerning the achievement of gifted males in secondary school English. You have been selected for this study as you have demonstrated an exceptional skill and talent for English that sets you apart from students your own age. However, it is my observation that you are not achieving to your potential in English. I am concerned that you have the potential to achieve higher marks than you are currently receiving, but there is something preventing you from attaining these results. The aim of this research study is to find out more about gifted males in English. I would like to find out about your characteristics, behaviours, opinions, attitudes and ability in the subject. I hope that by finding out more about your needs, your school and English teachers can learn more about how to better meet your needs and help you achieve to your potential.

If you have any questions, I can be contacted using the following details:

Two supervisors from Massey University have been provided to help oversee this research project. Tracy Riley and Sally Hansen are both lecturers at the University and have extensive experience in the areas of gifted education and males in English. They also have extensive experience with conducting and overseeing research. They can be contacted on the details provided below.

Tracey Riley

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Sally Hansen

Massey University Department of Education

Hokowhitu Campus, Palmerston North

Phone: (06) 356 9099 ext 8705

S.E.Hansen@massey.ac.nz

Participant Recruitment

There will be ten students participating in this research project – two from each year level of

secondary education (years 9 to 13). You have been selected because you have been identified as having an exceptional talent for English, but your results in English do not seem to match this amazing talent. Please note, that due to your age, if you parent/caregiver(s) do not consent to you participating, you will be unable to participate in this study.

Participant Involvement

The aim of this study is to understand your opinions and attitudes. I want to hear how you prefer to learn, what you would like to learn about, and what you would like your English lessons to look like. I will conduct an interview with you that will take approximately one hour. In this interview I will ask you about your current achievement in English and what you would like to see changed. The aim of this interview is to find out ways in which we can better meet your needs and help you achieve to your potential. Before this interview I will also ask you to complete questionnaires that will provide me with more information about your learning needs. These questionnaires will take no more than one hour to complete. This questionnaire will be posted to your home and you can return it to school when you are ready. Therefore you will need to give two hours of your time in total to this research study.

I will also interview your parents and your English teachers for approximately one hour each. These interviews are designed to give me more information about your ability and your current achievement levels. These interviews will be transcribed and you are welcome to read the transcripts.

I will also collect other sources of data to build a full profile of your needs. I will collect work samples, previous school reports and a record of your assessment results. You will have full access to the data I collect and are welcome to see any data I have on you. All identifying information will be removed so that you will remain anonymous.

In summary, the following data will be collected about you:

- STAR results – from the English test you sat at the beginning of the year.
- Assessment results – from English as well as other subjects.
- Previous school reports
- Your questionnaire responses
- Your own responses from the interview
- Responses from your English teacher and parent(s) in their interviews

All of this data will be used to understand your ability level, characteristics, behaviour, learning preferences and learning needs.

Project Procedures

Once the data has been collected, I will be analysing the results to find out about the needs of yourself and the other nine participants. I will create a full profile for each student which will detail their behaviours, characteristics, opinions, attitudes and abilities. Conclusions will focus on meeting your needs, and what schools and teachers could do to support the achievement of you, our gifted students. At the end of the study, I will provide you with a summary of the research results.

Anonymity of all participants is of the utmost importance in this research project. All identifying information on work samples and reports will be immediately removed. Interviews will be taped and transcribed, but all identifying information will be destroyed. Yourself, your teachers and your parents will not be named at any point. All data and consent forms will be kept in locked filing cabinets which cannot be accessed by anyone except myself.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question
- Withdraw from the study by August 2009
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded
- Ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the interview

Support Processes

If you feel uncomfortable at any stage about participating in this research project, you have the right to withdraw. If you would like further information or support, you can contact the researcher or the researcher supervisors. All contact details are provided on the front page.

Appendix E: Consent Forms for Student Participants

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Student Participants)

This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree / do not agree to the interview being audio taped.

I wish / do not wish to have my tapes returned to me.

I agree to not disclose anything discussed in the interview.

I agree to the researcher, Anna Blake, collecting the following information about me: work samples, past school reports and assessment results.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name – Printed: _____

Signature of parent/ guardian: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name – Printed: _____

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Parents/ Guardians)

This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree / do not agree to the interview being audio taped.

I wish / do not wish to have my tapes returned to me.

I agree to not disclose anything discussed in the interview.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name – Printed: _____

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Teachers)

This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree / do not agree to the interview being audio taped.

I wish / do not wish to have my tapes returned to me.

I agree to not disclose anything discussed in the interview.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name – Printed: _____

Appendix F: Heacox (1991) "Up from Underachievement" Questionnaire

Student Questionnaire

'How well do I play the school game?'

Use this scale to answer these questions. A score **5** means **Strong agree**. A score of **1** means **strongly disagree**. A score of **3** means **neutral** (or you do not know).

1. I leave assignments and projects until the last minute.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. In order to get something done, I may settle for less than my best.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. If I have to choose between my school work and almost any other activity, the school work comes in second.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

4. Because I am not prepared for class, I feel anxious and upset about school.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. I worry about being embarrassed in school if the teacher calls on me and I don't know the answer.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

6. I am worried that my friends will find out that I am not doing well in school.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

7. When learning seems too hard, I just give up.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

8. My teachers don't seem to know or care about how I learn best.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

9. I sometimes find out that I have done an assignment incorrectly because I didn't understand the directions, or because I didn't check the directions to see if I was doing it right.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

10. I forget the dates that assignments are due.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

11. I purposely don't do well on some assignments so that my friends won't think I'm a nerd.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

12. I avoid new things because I may not be good enough at them.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

13. I sometimes find myself daydreaming in class.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

14. Sometimes I turn my work in late because I'm not satisfied with the job I did and I need more time to revise it.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

15. Sometimes my teachers use words I don't understand.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

16. Big projects overwhelm me. I think I'll never get them done.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

17. I don't know some of the things my teachers expect me to know.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

18. I have a hard time asking for help.

1	2	3	4	5
Strong Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree

Circle your answers to the following questions:

I listen to everything the teachers say	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
I do my homework before I watch television or surf the Internet.	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
I come to school even if I am sick	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
Lunch is the most enjoyable time at school.	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
What I learn in school is important. It will help me later in life.	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
I come to school on time.	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
I take care of school property	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
I am kind and courteous to my classmates and teachers.	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
I enjoy coming to school	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER
I feel good about the quality of work I do in school.	ALWAYS	SOMETIMES	NEVER

Appendix G: Interview Questions – Student Participants

Estimated time of interview: 1 hour maximum.

The following questions provide some structure for the interviews. Questions may be slightly altered as needed.

Introduction to interview: Participants will be reminded of the purposes of the study (these would have already been detailed in the information letters). Participants will be made aware that I am trying ways to better meet their needs, so that they can achieve to their potential.

Question 1: Tell me a bit about yourself – what year are you in and what subjects are you studying?

Question 2: What do you enjoy doing outside of school – do you have any hobbies/ interests?

Question 3: Do you enjoy reading? What books have you recently read?

Question 4: What is your best school subject? Why?

Question 5: What is your worst subject? Why?

Question 6: How would you describe your achievements at school in 2008? Were you proud of the results you gained? What was your best subject and what was your worst?

Question 7: Do you think you could have achieved better in 2008? Is there any particular subject you think you could have done better in?

Question 8: What grades did you receive in English in 2008?

Question 9: What grades are you currently receiving in English?

Question 10: Are you enjoying English this year? Why/ why not?

Question 11: What is your favourite topic/ assessment in English? Why?

Question 12: What is your worst topic/ assessment in English? Why?

Question 13: Do you agree that you are gifted in English (or do you think you have a particular talent for English?)

Question 14: What parts of English do you find particularly boring or easy?

Question 15: How would you describe your behaviour in English?

Question 16: Do you complete most tasks/ assessments in English? Do you meet deadlines for work?

Question 17: What is your favourite way to learn at school? (I will provide examples as necessary).

Question 18: Do you prefer working in groups or individually? In your classes, what role do you take in group work?

Longer Discussion Questions

Discussion 1: If you were able to plan your lessons in English, what would they look like – what topics would you study, how would you learn and what would your assessments be?

Discussion 2: Do you think you are 'underachieving' in English (I will discuss what I believe underachievement to be)? Why do you think this is?

Discussion 3: Is there anything you would like your English teacher (or future English teachers) to know to help you achieve?

Appendix H: Interview Questions – Parents

The following questions will form the basis for a semi-structured interview with the parents/caregivers of participants. Questions may be slightly altered as needed.

Interview time: 1 hour maximum.

General Questions

Question 1: Do you consider your child to be gifted? What have you based this decision on? In what areas/ subjects do you consider your child to be gifted in?

Question 2: Describe your child's achievement at school and across subjects to date.

Question 3: What is your child's attitude to school in general?

Question 4: Do you have any concerns about your child's behaviour at school? If so, why do you believe your child is misbehaving at school?

Question 5: Do you have any concerns about your child's application to school work?

Question 6: Do you believe your child could be achieving at a higher level? Are there any subjects in particular in which your child could be gaining higher marks?

Question 7: How does your child prefer to learn?

Question 8: Do you think your child's needs are being met at the present time? Do you believe his/her learning preferences are being catered for?

English

Question 9: What talents/ skills does your child have in English? What are their favourite parts of this subject?

Question 10: Thinking specifically of English, what is your child's attitude towards this subject? If they do not enjoy English, why do you think this is?

Question 11: Do you believe that your child is performing below their ability in English? Do you believe this is concerning?

Question 12: What do you think is holding your child back from achieving to their potential in English?

Question 13: What do you think would be needed from the school and teachers to help your child to excel in English?

Appendix I: Interview Questions – Teachers

The following forms the basis for a semi-structured interview that will be held with the English teachers of the participants. Questions may be slightly altered as needed.

Interview time: 1 hour maximum

Question 1: Do you believe this student is gifted in English? What evidence do you have to support this?

Question 2: What talents or skills does this student have in English?

Question 3: What is this student's behaviour like in the class?

Question 4: What is this student's work completion like in class? Do they meet deadlines and complete all set tasks and assessments?

Question 5: How would you describe the quality of work that this student produces?

Question 6: What level of achievement has this student achieved this year so far? Is this level of achievement satisfactory considering their level of ability?

Question 7: Do you believe this student is underachieving (achieving below their potential) in English?

Question 8: Why do you think this student is underachieving? (What factors do you attribute to their underachievement?)

Appendix J: Authority for the Release of Tape Transcripts

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

Authority for the Release of Transcripts (Student Participants)

This form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used by the researcher, Anna Blake, in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name – Printed: _____

Signature of parent/guardian: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name – Printed: _____

Gifted Boys in English: Uncovering Underachievement

Authority for the Release of Transcripts (Parents and Teachers)

This form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used by the researcher, Anna Blake in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full Name – Printed: _____