



Overconfident and Bored:

A report complimenting a phenomenological documentary of young people who were called intelligent by parents and teachers, yet experienced significant academic struggles in secondary school.

Seth Sharp

MA Project
University of Iceland
School of Education



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Overconfident and Bored:

A report complimenting a phenomenological documentary of young people who were called intelligent by parents and teachers, yet experienced significant academic struggles in secondary school.

Seth Sharp

MA thesis in International Studies in Education

Thesis supervisor: Stefán Jökulsson

Faculty of Education Studies

School of Education, University of Iceland

June 2012

This report is part of a 60 credit final project towards the MA degree in International Studies in Education, School of Education, University of Iceland.

© 2012 Seth Sharp

No part of this material may be reproduced without permission of the author.

Printing: Háskólaprent

Reykjavik, 2012

Abstract

What causes a young person who is considered intelligent by everyone around him to fail classes or drop out of secondary school? This report complements a documentary presenting a phenomenological study of five such individuals and shows commonalities in their experiences and attitudes toward school and learning.

As a researcher, who identified with many of the attitudes and struggles of the participants, I also conducted an autoethnographic study to see if actively focusing on my approach to learning could both improve my attitude and make me a more efficient learner.

The participants in the study most often cited dissatisfaction with the school system (boring classes, irrelevant subjects, lack of a challenge in class, oppressive atmosphere) as a prime reason for failing classes or dropping out. The assumption of effortless mastery of subjects seemed to lead most of the participants into an overconfidence, which made them reject hard work, studying and homework. Ultimately, I found that it took hundreds of hours of concerted effort to change these attitudes within myself and become a more efficient learner. The documentary indicates that perhaps some intelligent students may be ill-prepared for the challenges of secondary school because their parents and teachers focused more attention on building their self-confidence as youngsters by calling them intelligent than encouraging them to learn efficient study habits.

Útdráttur

Of sjálfsörugg og leiðist námið: skýrsla sem tengist heimildarmynd þar sem gerð er grein fyrir niðurstöðum fyrirbærafræðilegrar rannsóknar á ungu fólki sem var kallað greint af foreldrum og kennurum en stríddi samt við mikla erfiðleika í námi í framhaldsskóla.

Hvað veldur því að ung manneskja sem talin er greind af öllum í kringum hana fellur á prófum eða hættir í framhaldsskóla? Í myndinni er sagt frá fimm slíkum einstaklingum og sýnir hún sameiginlega í reynslu þeirra og viðhorf gagnvart skóla og námi. Þar sem ég, rannsakandinn, þekki af eigin raun viðhorf og baráttu þátttakenda og get sett mig í spor þeirra, beindist hluti rannsóknarinnar einnig að sjálfum mér. Vildi ég því jafnframt huga að eigin námi svo ég gæti bætt viðhorf mitt þess og aukið skilvirkni mína í því.

Þátttakendur í rannsókninni nefndu oftast óánægju með skólakerfið (leiðinleg fög, óáhugaverðar námsgreinar, skort á áskorun í námi, þrúgandi andrúmsloft) sem megin ástæðu þess að þeir féllu á prófi eða hættu í skóla. Sú hugmynd þátttakenda að þeir hefðu ekkert fyrir því að læra virtist skapa með þeim flestum falskt sjálfsöryggi sem olli því það þeir lögðu minni vinnu í heimanám. Raunin varð sú að það tók mig nokkur hundruð klukkustundir að breyta mínum eigin viðhorfum og verða skilvirkari nemandi. Heimildamyndin bendur till þess að sumir greindir nemendur að fái ekki rangan undirbúning sem hæfir fyrir kröfum framhaldsskólans vegna þess að foreldrar þeirra og kennarar beindu meiri áherslu á að byggja upp sjálfstraust á unga aldri með því að kalla þau greind heldur en að hvetja þau til að temja sér skilvirkar námsvenjur.

Contents

Abstract	3
Útdráttur	5
Contents	7
1 Introduction	9
1.1.1 Taking the next step	11
1.2 Definition of terms	11
1.3 Statement of the problem.....	12
1.4 Scope of the study.....	14
1.5 Significance of the project.....	15
2 Literature Review	17
2.1 Introduction.....	17
2.2 What is intelligence?	18
2.3 Why do some students find secondary school uninteresting?..20	
2.4 What factors contribute to poor academic achievement?	20
2.5 Overconfidence and poor academic achievement	21
2.6 The costs of struggling to achieve academically	22
3 Methodology	25
3.1 The phenomenological study	25
3.2 The autoethnographic study	27
4 Results	29
4.1 The phenomenological study	29
4.1.1 Question 1	29
4.1.2 Question 2	32
4.2 The autoethnographic study	34
4.2.1 Question 1	34
4.2.2 Question 2	36
4.2.3 A brand new start.....	37
4.2.4 The autodidact in me	38

4.2.4.1	Implementing the strategies	41
5	Discussion and implications	43
5.1	Introduction.....	43
5.2	Interpretation of Findings	43
5.3	Potential application of the findings	45
5.4	Limitations of the study.....	46
6	Conclusion	50
7	Bilbiography.....	52

1 Introduction

During my first two years of study at the University of Iceland, I frequented a local coffee shop where I read literature for my classes and did homework assignments. The atmosphere suited my learning style – I find libraries too quiet and studying at home tempts me into distraction. This coffee shop was also frequented by: political activists, downtrodden alcoholics, unsuspecting tourists, and most notably, large groups of rowdy teenagers. I got to know many of the teenagers at this coffee shop because they took a keen interest in my studies and often wanted to help me with my homework (when I was studying Icelandic).

Some of the teenagers that I met at this coffee shop had impeccable English skills and spoke with American accents, although very few of them had traveled to North America. Many of them told me that this was the result of watching lots of American movies and TV shows. I found many of them knowledgeable about various topics and they were quite willing to share their points of view about world events, politics, Icelandic social life, and American culture.

I assumed that many of the kids that I met were great academic achievers – given the fluency in our conversations, both in English and in Icelandic. I compared my experiences with many young people in the United States (where I had taught for several years) and these young Icelanders seemed far more in-tune with world events. However, I was shocked and dismayed, upon further investigation, to find that many of these young people were either failing many classes in secondary school or had dropped out of school altogether.

I wanted to understand why an articulate (and often talented) young person could be failing high school or drop out of high school. This was of particular interest to me since I am pursuing a master's degree in international studies in education at the University of Iceland. As I listened to the stories of a couple of these young people, I found myself relating with many of their experiences. They explained why they thought that school was such an undesirable place: it was boring; the subjects were irrelevant; the teachers were stupid; the other students were stupid; and "what's the point". I had certainly felt all of those things, at different points throughout my academic career, so I was compelled to figure out why these

particular young people had had such a tough time in school. I spoke at length with one young man about his hatred of school. As we talked about his negative experiences with school, he also conveyed to me a deep desire for learning new things and acquiring new skills and information?

What were the reasons for this contradiction?

The more we talked, the more my struggles with school came to the front of my mind: vivid pictures of sitting in classes in my high school, college, and then in graduate school, where I felt like I was being tortured. I did not often receive poor grades in my secondary school classes but the road to academic achievement was often rough, even if I was constantly told how smart I was. When issues would come up with my performance in school, my teachers and parents would always juxtapose what they knew of my supposed intelligence with my negative performance. I never understood why there was sometimes such a discrepancy in what I was “supposed to be capable of” in school and what I actually did.

As I got to know one particular kid from the coffee shop and hear about his struggles in school, I began to question why I was often at risk for failing or dropping out of school. I was also reading a book for my pedagogy course called, “Effective Learning in Classrooms”. The book described ways to help learners “become more effective” by “helping them gain an understanding of their own learning” (Watkins, Carnell, & Lodge, 2007, p. 124). The combination of focusing on how I learned (through the pedagogy course) and my many conversations with young people about their struggles with school, improved my ability to learn consciously. I realized that I had been waiting for my teachers/professors to make their courses relevant to my life and relevant to the things that interested me. I wanted my teachers to entertain me and to make me fall in love with learning each subject. As I began to explore learning consciously, it laid the groundwork for me to take more responsibility for my learning and ultimately do things to improve it such as develop better study habits and approach difficult or uninteresting school subjects more effectively.

My conversations with the young people at the coffee shop had a profound effect on me. I saw the benefits of self-reflection on my attitude toward school and learning via those conversations. The idea to work on a thesis involving young people who were told they were intelligent yet struggled in secondary school came from my conversations with such young people. Not only did I want to formally study their attitudes and see if there were commonalities between them, I wanted to dig deeper into my attitudes to both assess what I shared with these young people and to

actively adopt more productive attitudes and strategies in order to become a more effective learner.

1.1.1 Taking the Next Step

The task I put forward for myself would not be easy. I wanted to conduct a study on the attitudes of young people who were told they were intelligent yet experienced significant academic struggles in secondary school while also researching my own attitudes and learning strategies in order to change the ones which did not serve me. In order to do this, I opted for a year-long, 60-ects thesis. For the young people, I decided upon a phenomenological study of five individuals in order to discover commonalities between them. My part of the thesis was an autoethnographic study.

Seeing the benefits of focusing on my attitudes toward learning, because of the conversations that I had with the young people at the coffee shop, I decided to film the participants and make a documentary of the phenomenological study. In presenting part of my thesis as a documentary geared toward young people who were called intelligent, yet struggled to achieve academically in secondary school, I sought to offer them the potential benefits of focusing on their own attitudes toward learning. A study was done on Korean college students which found that “video can be an effective medium to present authentic situations in order to enhance student satisfaction, empathy, and learning achievement in problem-based instruction” (Choi & Yang, 2011, p. 551). As my documentary is mostly concerned with students’ attitudes (toward school and learning), highlighting these factors has the potential to inspire self-reflection among the students who watch the documentary and who participate in the making of it.

1.2 Definition of Terms

Autoethnography – “is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Phenomenological - “...a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The research on high school dropouts and academic failure often focuses on things such as environment, economic factors, prior academic achievement, gender, the availability and attractiveness of jobs for young people in secondary school, substance abuse, learning disabilities and student's perception of their school environment (do they find classes boring or the school system unresponsive to their needs). I do not dispute the validity of approaching the issue of academic failure and high school dropouts from these angles as such research can help to improve dropout rates when recommendations are properly implemented. The high school dropout rate in the United States, for example, has fallen by almost fifty percent since 1980 (Dropout Rates, 2011). When race, for example, is taken into account, the dropout rate for African-Americans has fallen from 19.1% in 1980 to 9.3% in 2009. This helps to establish that concerted efforts to target particular populations can improve that population's academic success rate.

Young people who experience major academic struggles in secondary school, despite being called intelligent by parents and teachers, represent an under-researched group of young people who either drop out of secondary school or experience major academic struggles. The dropout rate in Iceland, for example, is calculated at 40% of people between the age of 18-24 (Blondal, Jónasson, & Tannhäuser, 2011). In the article, "Dropout in a Small Society: Is the Icelandic Case Somehow Different?" the authors examined the issue of dropouts in Iceland from three perspectives: system, school and individual. (*ibid*, p. 241). This study broke down individuals according to age, gender, and academic achievement at the end of compulsory school. Whether or not an individual was called intelligent by parents and teachers, was not taken into account in this particular study. The case has yet to be made for young people who are called intelligent, yet struggle to achieve academically in secondary school, so solutions for this specific population are not yet forthcoming. In doing this research, I hope to help to define this group as a population (in a similar context to race, gender, learning disability, etc.) by revealing the stories of the participants and opening the way for discovering and implementing solutions.

I would not have contemplated a connection between being called intelligent by teachers and parents and having academic struggles (or dropping out) until I met many young people who seemed to fall into that category. The retention programs in schools tend to focus on students who

have been identified as having special needs. The Icelandic report, referenced earlier, stated that 20% of students received help based on being “special needs” students and Icelandic law makes provisions for schools to provide for such students (Blondal, Jónasson, & Tannhäuser, 2011). Students who have been called intelligent by teachers and parents, who fail or drop out of school, have yet to be defined as a specific population. Therefore, school systems, which aim to identify and retain students who are at risk of failing or dropping out, are not attending to the unique problems of young people who are called intelligent, yet struggle to achieve academically in secondary school.

What percent of students who drop out of high school or who struggle to achieve academically are called intelligent? The current research on dropouts does not directly account for this population. Different studies have calculated the proportion of gifted dropouts, where giftedness has been defined by various measures, including scores on standardized tests and IQ tests, but there remains a disagreement between these studies on the actual percentage (Renzulli & Park, 2000). Perhaps this is due to the sometimes conflicting theories on how to define and measure intelligence and on who should officially be called intelligent. Different theories on intelligence will be discussed in the literature review section of this paper. It is the position of this paper not to take a particular stance on defining intelligence instead to focus on the effects of being called intelligent on the participants in the study (whatever intelligence means to them).

In order to shed light on this issue and initiate further research on this specific topic of students who are called intelligent by teachers and parent yet experienced significant academic struggles, I asked three main questions:

Why do some secondary students, who are perceived as intelligent (by parents or school staff), do poorly in school or drop out of school altogether?

Does being perceived as not working up to one’s potential have an effect on a poor-performing secondary student’s attitude toward school?

Are there common threads between young people who are told by their teachers/parents that their academic effort/achievement does not match their intelligence?

The consequences of dropping out of secondary school or even failing to achieve academically can create many problems for the individual who drops out. A study by Aldo Alfredo Moran concludes that failing a high-stakes test, for example, can make a student unable to overcome the idea

of being unsuccessful and make this student more prone to dropping out of school altogether (Moran, 2010). Society also can shoulder the burden of dropouts who do not productively contribute to society. A Canadian study on dropouts suggests a strong relationship between level of educational attainment and incarceration. People who drop out of high school tend to be disproportionately represented among prison populations (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). This study showed that remaining in school tends to make people healthier and suffer fewer symptoms of depression than their counterparts who drop out of high school (*ibid*, 2009).

For the young person who is called intelligent, there are potentially greater emotional burdens, when they fail to achieve academically in secondary school, because of their expectations of academic success (based on prior success) and the pressure put upon them by parents and teachers. In the study of fifth graders, those students who were called intelligent because of their academic achievement suffered greater setbacks upon failure and displayed less task persistence than their counterparts who were complimented on working hard when they did well in school (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). The many issues facing young people who are called intelligent, yet who struggle to achieve academically, make it imperative to understand young people in this position and develop solutions to keep them from struggling to achieve academically and to help those who are in the midst of that struggle or who have already dropped out.

1.4 Scope of the Study

The young people that I met at the coffee shop, who were called intelligent, yet had major academic struggles, came from various backgrounds: some grew up wealthy in households with two parents, some came from broken homes where there was substance abuse by a parent, some were males, some were females, some grew up in Iceland and only went to schools in Iceland, and some had gone to schools in various countries. The most common denominator seemed to be that they were all called intelligent by parents and teachers yet they had failed classes in secondary school or had dropped out of school all together. In keeping with my preliminary observations of those young people, I decided to focus on this unifying factor rather than seeking out participants based on nationality, gender or social status. Therefore, this study aimed to find commonalities between diverse members of this population.

I used a combination of social media and snowball sampling to find participants for my research. Initially when I announced on

“Facebook.com” that I was looking for participants for my thesis project, I received inquiries from people of all ages – even people in their 60s who had failed many classes in secondary school and had made many attempts over their lifetimes to complete secondary school, despite being called intelligent by their parents and teachers. Ultimately, I limited the study to people who were between the ages of 16 and 24 since both the Icelandic and American studies define a “dropout” as someone who is between the ages of 16 and 24 who leaves secondary school. The resulting documentary is geared toward young people in this population, with the aim of showing them peers discussing their struggles to achieve academically in secondary school.

1.5 Significance of the Project

As governments and school systems work to reduce dropout rates and improve academic achievement in secondary schools, it is important for as many factors to be accounted for as possible. When people are asked why they dropped out, the response is often, “school was not interesting enough”. This answer sheds some light on the problem, but perhaps it does not go deep enough into the problem. Perhaps it is also possible that school is not interesting enough to different students for different reasons.

Educational institutions often try to predict success in secondary school by looking at a student’s academic achievement in compulsory schools. Both the major Icelandic study and the American study made a connection between poor academic achievement in compulsory school and poor academic achievement in secondary school. The results of the Icelandic study were not 100% conclusive, however, in that a portion of those students who did well in compulsory school did not do well in secondary school. This is where this study attempts to add to the existing research on secondary school dropouts and poor academic achievement, as all of the subjects in my project claimed to have excelled in compulsory school yet failed many classes in secondary school or dropped out altogether.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

What are the factors that cause some students, who are called intelligent by parents and teachers, to experience significant academic struggles in secondary school?

In order to answer this question, several factors can be examined: what does being called intelligent mean to a young person, what causes young people in general to have academic struggles or to drop out of secondary school and what role do parents, teachers and school systems play in causing this situation. As stated earlier in the paper, this paper avoids taking sides in the debate on what defines intelligence, rather it seeks to illuminate how being called intelligent affects some young people who struggle to achieve academically in secondary school and how lacking a clear definition of what it means to be intelligent could contribute to their academic struggles.

The issues of academic failure and dropping out of secondary school have been explored from many points of view. Quantitative studies have been done in order to tally what percentage of students are affected by these issues and what extenuating factors could possibly contribute to academic failure/attrition. Qualitative studies, which focus on students' attitudes towards failure and why they have dropped out, have attempted to delve deeper into the numbers and portray general reasons for these issues.

A common reason for students dropping out has been a negative attitude toward school. The National Governors' Association (USA) attempted to tackle the problem of secondary school dropouts. In their research they found that, "Dropouts point to disinterest in school as a key reason for missing classes and ultimately leaving school" (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009, p. 12). In an interview with the newspaper, *Fréttablaðið*, Professor Kristjana Stella Blöndal reiterates this point by quoting her research on fourteen and fifteen year olds which showed that, "Feelings toward school and learning seem to affect future studies" (Minna menntuð en við hældum (S. Sharp, "Trans".), 2010).

Lastly, what are the ramifications inside and outside of school, for the young person who is called intelligent, yet struggles to achieve academically? It appears that failing classes can have a huge impact on young people who are called intelligent. Also, those who eventually drop out of school can face a host of challenges including depression, lack of job satisfaction, and long periods of unemployment. Often, not only the dropout bears the weight of her decision, society can also share that burden in the form of tax dollars going towards incarceration for those involved in criminal activity, unemployment payments and other social services, which are less utilized by people who complete their secondary school training (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). Social issues aside, does it benefit society to let possibly some of its best and brightest become high school dropouts rather than use their intelligence to make valuable contributions to society?

2.2 What is Intelligence?

Frankly speaking, what defines intelligence depends upon which scholars you ask. (Perez-Studdard, 2010) To complicate matters even more, the definition of intelligence has grown to include different types of intelligence, from emotional intelligence to “book smarts” to “street smarts” and beyond. Also, different types of learning strategies have been identified so learners can now be classified according to their learning types. There are kinesthetic learners, logical-mathematical learners, visual-spatial learners among other types (Tahriri & Divsar, 2011). The identification of different learning styles and different types of intelligence appears to be geared toward meeting the needs of a greater number of students. The image of the ineffective teacher standing in front of the chalkboard, teaching bored students and connecting only to the logical-mathematical learners, has become the symbol of what not to do in the classroom for those interested in changing out-of-touch school systems. This movement has helped to include more students in the education process and encouraged many school systems to modernize, including introducing advancing technology into the classroom. What has remained a subject of great debate, however, is how to define intelligence and whether or not it is even possible to have one definition of intelligence (Perez-Studdard, 2010).

For the young person who is called intelligent, how much does the definition of intelligence truly matter? One could argue that by properly

identifying how a young person learns, he could be encouraged to develop that learning style even further and approach most new subjects with that learning style. Ultimately, he could develop his intelligence as a visual-spatial learner so that every subject he encounters, difficult or not, would be approached using techniques from the visual-spatial learner handbook. Regardless of his learning style, and what type of intelligence he has, the research indicates that being praised for intelligence, rather than for working hard, is what can ultimately lead to academic struggles (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). For the young person who is called intelligent, yet struggles to achieve academically in secondary school, the definition of intelligence seems to have much less significance than how this young person views intelligence.

Current research indicates that students who believe that intelligence is innate and therefore unchangeable tend to avoid work that challenges them and appear to be more sensitive to negative feedback (bad grades, errors, negative comments, etc.) than their counterparts who view intelligence as malleable and able to be developed (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006). Young people who believe in the innate nature of intelligence, who are also called entity theorists, are susceptible to giving up when faced with the possibility of failure and tend to reject remediation (extra help from a teacher or tutor), even if it would keep them from failing (*ibid*, 2006). In a school setting, the entity theorist is often more concerned with proving his "intelligence" and outperforming his peers rather than focusing on learning goals which will enhance his knowledge of a particular subject. The entity theorist is therefore much less likely to take on tasks (difficult or uninteresting subjects) which make her unable to prove her intelligence (*ibid*, 2006). Again, how intelligence is defined seems to be much less relevant to the entity theorist than the fact that they believe that their intelligence is innate and unchanging and that being called intelligent has distinguished them from their peers.

The good news is that it is possible to teach students that intelligence (however it is defined) is malleable and can be improved. Teaching students this can change their attitude toward learning and ultimately improve their ability to achieve academically (Aronson, Good, & Fried, 2000). It appears that young people who are called intelligent, yet struggled to achieve academically in secondary school, are not necessarily doomed to a life of academic struggles if they are taught that intelligence can be improved with effort. Demystifying the nature of intelligence might only be part of the solution for such a young person involved in an academic struggle, however. It also needs to be addressed why this type of

student often finds school uninteresting and what the parents, teachers and the school system do to contribute to their academic struggles.

2.3 Why Do Some Students Find Secondary School Uninteresting?

R. Kirk Fallis and Susan Opotow conducted a qualitative study of secondary school students to ascertain what these students meant when they described school or some classes as boring. Their research found that "...boring connotes a one-way, tops-down, unengaged relationship with a teacher whose pedagogy feels disrespectful because it is not designed to tempt, engage, or include students. In addition, for students, boring connotes something missing in their education, conveys a deep sense of disappointment, and casts class cutting as a coping mechanism for classes that fail to engage" (Fallis & Opotow, 2003, p. 108).

Other factors which the students in Fallis' and Opotow's study mentioned as causing them to be bored were: the slow pace of the classrooms, teachers who spent a lot of time trying to help students who could not comprehend the subject material quickly and a pedagogy which did not address students' various motivators and skills. (Fallis & Opotow, 2003, p. 109) Additionally, Fallis' and Opotow's study found that students "...see boredom also at the institutional level, as the way things are done in schools..." (Fallis & Opotow, 2003, p. 109)

2.4 What Factors Contribute to Poor Academic Achievement?

Often, if students think that their school system is inflexible, they will respond to boredom by cutting classes or withdrawing from school (Fallis & Opotow, 2003). Because attendance in classes is often mandatory in secondary school, frustrated and disengaged students are often faced with the dilemma of choosing between abandoning school systems which do not cater to their needs or remaining in uninteresting classes. How are such students able to make mature judgments about which option to take? If some young people hold the belief that the school system is not going to address their needs, how can they find the motivation to continue attending boring classes?

Another factor which can contribute to how a student endeavors to achieve academically is his perception of the nature of intelligence (or academic ability). In the research article, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence

Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition: A Longitudinal Study and an Intervention” the authors confirm that “...adolescents who endorse more of an incremental theory of malleable intelligence also endorse stronger learning goals, hold more positive beliefs about effort, and make fewer ability-based, “helpless” attributions, with the result that they choose more positive, effort-based strategies in response to failure...” (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007, p. 258). Students who make the connection between increased effort and academic achievement can perhaps better cope with school systems which do not necessarily cater to their needs and motivators.

2.5 Overconfidence and Poor Academic Achievement

What about students who are taught their intelligence makes it possible for them to achieve academically without effort?

In the article, “Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance” the authors seek to dispel the notion that praising a child for its ability would have positive effects on motivation (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Their research, which focused on fifth graders, indicated that the fifth graders who were “praised for intelligence were found to care more about performance goals relative to learning goals than children praised for effort. After failure, they also displayed less task persistence, less task enjoyment, more low-ability attributions, and worse task performance than children praised for effort. Finally, children praised for intelligence described it as a fixed trait more than children praised for hard work, who believed it to be subject to improvement” (Mueller & Dweck, 1998, p. 33).

Perhaps some students are systematically being taught by parents and teachers not to work hard. If a young person, who excelled in elementary school was constantly complimented on her ability to excel without much effort and this lack of effort was referred to as innate intelligence, it seems possible that such a student could develop overconfidence toward learning and an aversion to working hard. Prior research demonstrates that a student's overconfidence can contribute to poor academic achievement (Clayson, 2005, p. 122). In the study, “Performance Overconfidence: Metacognitive Effects or Misplaced Student Expectations?” the author concludes that this overconfidence is perhaps “...determined by a students' past experience and expectations” (*ibid*, 2005, p. 122). If parents and teachers are contributing to a student's expectations of academic achievement without hard work, this possibly causes young people who

were called intelligent to struggle to achieve academically in secondary school.

2.6 The Costs of Struggling to Achieve Academically

Young people, who do not feel challenged by their academic environment, can become disruptive in the classroom and exhibit behavioral problems, they might not otherwise display. This can be disruptive for the student, the teacher and the student's classmates. If the teacher takes time from class to discipline a disruptive child, less time is spent on class instruction. The intelligent student, who is already bored with the slow pace of his class, can have his boredom exacerbated if the teacher has to backtrack in the lesson after a disciplinary interruption. In some cases, bored intelligent students, who regularly misbehave in class, are misdiagnosed as having ADHD and are then medicated (Edwards, 2009). This can be an unfortunate consequence for the intelligent student who is not able to constructively voice his feelings about the slow pace of the class.

Failing classes can lead to emotional distress for young people who are called intelligent. As was stated earlier, young people can develop the expectation to achieve academically because of their past academic experience. This expectation coupled with an aversion to approaching difficult subjects (because of being complimented on intelligence rather than effort) can cause negative emotional consequences for a young person who fails a mandatory subject in secondary school. Because of school system-wide curriculum standards for secondary schools, it can often be impossible for the risk-averse student to avoid every subject which might challenge him. The young person, who was called intelligent and lacks the tools to approach difficult or uninteresting subjects, could be headed for failure when those subjects are mandatory.

Being pressured by parents and teachers to achieve academically, especially in the face of failure, can be an added burden to young people who were called intelligent. Research shows that young people who are pressured to achieve academically do not necessarily outperform their counterparts who are not pressured by parents and this pressure can be emotionally harmful (Weissbourd, 2011). The young person who has been called intelligent by his parents and teachers can find himself without an emotional support network once he struggles to achieve academically. The parents and teachers, who boosted his ego as an elementary school student (by calling him intelligent when he did well in school) can turn into a source of pain and discomfort when they expect him to continue to achieve

academically in secondary school. If a young person never learned how to approach difficult or uninteresting subjects, because of being complimented on his intelligence for doing well in elementary school (rather than being complimented on his effort) coupled with not learning how to approach such subjects, the negative effects of parental pressure to achieve academically can be further compounded.

For those young people that drop out of secondary school, their future can get bleaker. “Many high school dropouts experience negative outcomes as a result of their decision to leave school, including diminished social growth, a reduced sense of control over their lives and life circumstances, and less personal satisfaction. The tangible costs are no less numerous: directly or indirectly, dropping out of high school has enormous fiscal implications for government, society, and individual school leavers in terms of expenditures in health, social services and programs, education, employment, criminality, and lower economic productivity” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

One of the major studies on dropouts in Iceland seems to downplay the negative consequences for dropouts. The study refutes the idea that the dropout’s job options are limited in Iceland. In fact, this study says that the labor market in Iceland offers “unusually enticing” jobs for under-educated young people, compared to other European countries (Blöndal, Jónasson, & Tannhäuser, 2011, bls. 242). This study also places less of an emphasis on the societal costs of having secondary school dropouts. Of the dropouts interviewed in the aforementioned study in Iceland, around half of the respondents felt the decision was the correct decision at the time, although another half felt that their job situation would be different if they had completed secondary school (Blondal, Jónasson, & Tannhäuser, 2011, bls. 244).

Perhaps life is easier in Iceland for secondary school dropouts than in other countries. This could contribute to the unusually high dropout rate of forty percent for people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four. If the social and societal consequences are not so great for dropping out of secondary school and one can still attain attractive employment, it is possible that being a secondary school dropout is not as grave a concern in Iceland for the dropout (and for society) as it is in other countries. However, the participants in my study, who live in Iceland, did not want to drop out of (or fail) school because their goals included advancing in their education and attaining employment that requires more than being an unskilled laborer. They also suffered emotional consequences (depression,

anger, hopelessness) resulting from failing or dropping out of school. Therefore, it seems, especially in Iceland, that young people who are called intelligent, yet struggle to achieve academically in secondary school, represent an under-researched population that could benefit from more attention being directed at understanding their circumstances.

3 Methodology

This project is divided into two parts: a phenomenological study of young people, who were called intelligent by parents and teachers, yet experienced significant academic struggles and an autoethnographic study of myself, as researcher, who was often called intelligent but struggled, however, with learning in academic institutions.

3.1 The phenomenological study

“...A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). My research focused on the *phenomenon* of academic difficulty among people who are told they are intelligent. As I found there were commonalities between my story and the stories of the young people with whom I conversed at the coffee shop, I used the phenomenological approach (as defined by John Creswell) where I would collect the stories of the participants and look for commonalities among the participants in order to “develop a composite description for all of the individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). In creating a composite description of the phenomenon in question, I could give a starting point for those affected by this phenomenon to identify with as well as add another perspective to the existing body of research on dropouts and poor academic achievement. Hearing the stories of the young people from the coffee shop was a starting point for me to evaluate my sometimes negative attitudes toward school and learning, because I could identify with their struggles. In this context, I see this research as an opportunity for students who are affected by this phenomenon to identify with the participants in this study and begin to evaluate their own attitudes.

In the book, “Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design”, John Creswell recommends asking the participants in a phenomenological study, two major questions (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). The two major questions asked were:

What have you experienced in terms of difficulties with academic achievement in secondary school, despite being called intelligent?

What situations have typically influenced or affected your ability to achieve academically in secondary school?

As indicated in an earlier section, five individuals were interviewed in this study. The participants were selected using a combination of convenience sampling, and snowballing. As I was proposing my research, I had approached a few individuals who were willing to participate in this research, and they helped me find others participants. Furthermore, I used social media (Facebook.com) to advertise my project and ask for volunteers.

Each participant was interviewed in a location that was comfortable for him/her and that facilitated having an open and honest dialogue. Each interview was conducted for roughly forty-five minutes. The interviews took place over a course of one month (from mid-December 2011 to mid-January 2012). Once the interviews were recorded, they were transcribed and coded for similar themes. For the coding, I used the software from the website, Dedoose.com, which was created by professors from the University of California's Fieldwork and Qualitative Data Research Library. This software allows the user to load transcripts (such as Microsoft word documents) which can then be broken down into excerpts and coded. The software supports multiple codes of one excerpt and parent/child codes (main subjects and subjects within a subject) and can generate graphs which compare various codes in order to determine the frequency of various themes and establish a relationship between those themes.

As patterns emerged in the data, the video from the participants' interviews was edited to reflect those emerging themes. Once a first draft of the documentary was completed, each participant was given a screening of his/her portion of the video, along with my notes on the patterns that I had recognized. This was done in order to check for accuracy and to ensure that my interpretations reflected the participants' statements (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 109).

Once the entire documentary was edited, I showed it to each of the participants, to make sure the images in the documentary truly represented their views. Initially, I planned to film additional footage of each participant engaging in the activities which they talked about in their interviews. However, as the interviews were coded and compared, I decided to take a different approach to the "B-Roll", as it is called in movie lingo. Instead of using footage of the participants, I used public domain footage from old movies. In my view, this helped to recreate the mood of the antiquated and out of touch school systems, which the participants unanimously

described as such. The participants agreed with my interpretation of their interviews and felt that using old footage illustrated some of their feelings about the school system, so the documentary was uploaded and sent to my project supervisor for approval.

The end product of this project, the documentary, will be released to the public on youtube.com so that young people who have been struggling with this particular issue (of being called intelligent, yet having major academic struggles) could use the video to further the discussion on school and learning attitudes. The aim is also to encourage discussion in the broader population about these issues.

3.2 The Autoethnographic Study

In constructing my autoethnographic study, I used guidance from the article, "Autoethnography: An Overview". In the article, the authors mention: "When researchers do *autoethnography*, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

For this project, I am defining the cultural group, to which I belong, as: people who were called intelligent by parents and teachers yet experienced significant academic struggles in secondary school. This is perhaps not a cultural group in the traditional sense of culture (based on geographical customs, socioeconomic status, gender, etc.). However, as I witnessed very clearly in the phenomenological study, the ideas, habits and traits of those participants in the study transcended gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status. More than being a phenomenon, the participants in the phenomenological study exhibited characteristics of belonging to a subculture (Merriam-Webster, 2012). As I researcher, I felt that I belonged to that subculture.

My experience with academic struggles and learning how to learn was an integral part of this project. Throughout the project, I kept a time and date-coded journal with my ideas on how I learn, how my learning changed over time, what were my problem areas (for example, what stands in the way of my learning new things) and what I could do to change my learning patterns for the better. I began with asking myself the two main questions which I asked the participants in the phenomenological study:

What have you experienced in terms of difficulties with academic achievement in secondary school, despite being called intelligent?

What situations have typically influenced or affected your ability to achieve academically in secondary school?

Once I answered these questions, I began researching ways to address and improve those areas which I identified as difficult. I watched many documentaries on learning, brain research, psychology and the study of intelligent people. I read articles on learning. My friends and project supervisor sent articles to me to read. I listened to hours of audio books which detailed the latest research on how people learn and the most efficient way for people to deepen their knowledge of different subjects. I will discuss my appropriation of this information in the “results” chapter of this report.

My participation in the documentary, as an autoethnographer, comes mostly at the beginning and the ending. At the beginning, I summarize my struggles with learning and how this inspired me to research and present a project on others who are in the midst of that struggle. At the end of the documentary, I briefly discuss my journey to becoming a better learner and relate it to the phenomenological study.

4 Results

4.1 The phenomenological study

4.1.1 Question 1

To the question, “What have you experienced in terms of difficulties with academic achievement in secondary school, despite being called intelligent,” the participants gave similar answers. All five had failed classes in secondary school. Three of them had failed entire semester’s worth of classes and had dropped out of school, while two of them managed to complete secondary school despite failing two to three classes in several different semesters.

Every participant mentioned not wanting to do homework and not liking to study. Each participant expressed the belief that if a subject was not interesting they had trouble justifying doing the homework. They felt that it was a waste of time and could not find the motivation to do it. The participants differed in what they did with their time instead of studying. Three participants admitted to engaging in substance abuse with friends instead of doing school work. Three of them played video games and one played a strategic card game at a local toy shop instead of doing homework.

What makes the participants in this study different than other subjects in qualitative research on high-school dropouts, is how being called intelligent affected their ability to achieve academically. An Icelandic study on dropouts makes a correlation between poor academic achievement in elementary school and poor academic achievement in secondary school (Blondal, Jónasson, & Tannhäuser, 2011). However, all of the participants in my study reported being at the top of their classes in elementary school and doing well on standardized tests. They went to elementary schools in three different countries (Iceland, USA and Luxembourg), yet all reported having done well on their respective standardized tests.

Why did the participants in my study, who excelled in elementary school yet failed many courses or dropped out of secondary school, buck the conventional wisdom on academic achievement in elementary school being a good predictor of academic achievement in secondary school?

Each participant in my study demonstrated overconfidence toward school work as a result of constantly being called intelligent by parents and teachers. All of them were called intelligent in elementary school because of their impressive and often effortless academic achievement. Several of them reported not having to do homework in elementary school and still being able to get high grades on tests (both in classes and regional/national standardized tests). The ease at which these participants achieved academically in elementary school, coupled with constantly being called intelligent, kept them from developing proper work habits, study habits and time management skills.

All of the participants demonstrated unpreparedness for the rigors of secondary school because they did not know how to approach uninteresting or difficult and often mandatory subjects. There were subjects that each participant could master in secondary school without effort but those subjects that required extra effort, either in order to comprehend or in which to excel, were often ignored by the participants because they did not know how to approach difficult or uninteresting subjects, which were often mandatory. Four of the five participants explicitly reported having developed a self-esteem surrounding their perceived intelligence. They seemed to thrive on their ability to not have to work as hard as their peers in order to do well in school. This ability was reinforced in elementary school by parents and teachers who complimented them on their ability to do well in school without having to work hard – because they were intelligent.

All of the participants reported suffering extreme blows to their self-esteem when the first time they failed a class. Their entire elementary school career consisted of being complimented for being intelligent (because of their academic achievement) so when they failed a class in secondary school, they were hardly prepared for the emotional effects of failure. All three of the participants, who reported engaging in substance abuse instead of doing school work, mentioned that the substance abuse started only after having failed their first class. One of those participants, Magnús, said that failing “...hurts a lot. Mostly, it hurts my ego and ever since then, I just like, couldn’t care less anymore for school or anything.” Another participant, Katherine, said of her drug use: “I just wanted to have fun and forget about what was really bothering me, which was school, you know, not doing well in school really did bother me. So I didn’t want to think about that and it’s one of those things, the less I think about it, the less it’s actually there. I can distort my own reality in such a way.” Apparently, the incongruity of being told that “I was smart and I could do

anything I wanted,” which Johann (one of the participants) was often told in elementary school and failing classes in secondary school caused a huge emotional impact on the participants in this study.

Each participant reported having strongly negative attitudes toward many aspects of secondary school, especially some of their teachers, fellow students, the “irrelevant” subjects they were forced to learn and the social environment of the school. None of them mentioned having a support network either in school or at home, which helped them to transition from being “intelligent” young people, who did not have to study in elementary school, to secondary school students, who would sometimes need to work hard.

Not having been taught any methods for approaching difficult work or boring subjects in secondary schools, each participant developed a method of getting through difficult subjects. One participant, Egill, mentioned often using his “charm and charisma” to con sympathetic teachers into passing him when he failed to ever hand in homework. When this approach worked for Egill, he was able to receive passing grades in classes where he might have gotten a much higher grade had he actually done the work in the class. When the approach did not work, Egill developed “an immune system to failing” because he concluded that innate intelligence was not connected to academic achievement in secondary school.

Sævar, a participant, who dropped out of secondary school at age eighteen after having failed an entire semester’s worth of classes, approached one of his teachers and asked if he could build a transistor radio from scratch rather than attending the mandatory electrical theory class which bored him. Sævar found it difficult to attend this particular class on a daily basis so he approached his teacher with this alternative form of assessment. The teacher agreed and Sævar passed the class.

Magnús mentioned that he would not go to classes which he found difficult. If there was a class that he could not master with little effort, he would “banish” it. Maggi said: “Basically, me being intelligent and that subject not being my strong suit, I just kicked it out of my area of expertise.” Magnús instead focused on the classes which were easy for him to master and he stated being willing to learn even more than he was required to learn in those classes.

Another barrier to academic achievement for some of the participants of the study was the idea that having to work hard was an indicator of not being innately intelligent. Being innately intelligent was, of course, part of the ego for most of the participants, so they held on to this idea that not

having to work hard in order to achieve academically proved their intelligence and distinguished them from their less intelligent classmates and peers. Egill expressed anger toward one of his harder-working classmates because he found her not to be intelligent yet she won the history award at graduation. History was Egill's favorite class and he felt he was the most intelligent student in his history classes. He also expressed a jealousy toward his hard-working classmates because he felt they were rewarded for working hard yet "in the institution that is supposed to reward intelligence, it doesn't reward that at all!"

The participants in the study seemed to be trapped in a paradox. Their ego was attached to being called intelligent because they never had to work hard in elementary school in order to excel academically. Yet in order to excel academically in secondary school, they needed to work hard, at least some of the time. If the basis of what made them feel special and unique and distinguished from their peers was having not to work hard, because of their innate intelligence, their first response to the rigors of secondary school would not be to work hard. Johann sums up the plight of the participants: "The not so intelligent people have to work hard because it's hard for them, so they possibly just work hard because it's hard. Then it just keeps getting harder and harder and then they work harder, but intelligent people – they don't work hard...so then they keep not working hard and when they have to start working hard, they can't, because they never actually learned to."

4.1.2 Question 2

What situations have typically influenced or affected your ability to achieve academically in secondary school?

All of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with their secondary schools (and with the school systems in question). To varying degrees, they expressed feeling trapped in school systems which did not and could not address their needs. As the participants were not limited to students of one school system, their experiences with struggling to achieve academically, despite being called intelligent, seem to demonstrate a broader pattern of school systems not attending to the needs of such students, rather than being an indictment of one particular school system. The participants stated that their ability to pick up many subjects quickly made it difficult for them to attend classes which were geared toward people who need more time to comprehend. Sometimes, this made school

and classes, an incredibly frustrating place, especially when class attendance was mandatory.

As is the case in many studies on secondary school dropouts, the participants mentioned that certain subjects, especially mandatory ones, were uninteresting. They did not appreciate having to study subjects which did not seem relevant to their lives and also felt burdened by high expectations from their teachers and parents, because of their perceived intelligence. Rather than being offered help or taught strategies to approach difficult or uninteresting (yet mandatory) subjects, the participants in the study reported often being threatened or demeaned by teachers or parents to achieve academically. Katherine was told that if she did not excel academically “you’re punished and you’ll never do anything with your life and you’re stupid”.

Three of the participants in the study mentioned developing into autodidacts, a self-taught person, in order to fill in the huge gaps in what they viewed as ineffective teaching strategies in their secondary schools. Sævar, the one who had approached his teacher about building the transistor radio, used videos from youtube.com to learn the things he needed to know in the electrics theory class he skipped. Sævar said that it took him twelve hours of watching videos on youtube.com and practicing what he learned to build a transistor radio (the final project for the class), which was supposed to take his classmates the entire semester (approximately 90 hours of class time and home study). The autodidacts found the ineffective teaching methods of some teachers a distraction thus making it harder for them to attend mandatory classes.

The participants in this study reported being pressured into having high grades (by parents and teachers) without being taught how to achieve high grades in secondary school. All of the participants reported having difficulty talking with their parents or teachers about their academic struggles because the parents and teachers had taken on adversarial roles. As mentioned earlier, each participant complained of not having a support network either at home or at school. In many ways, they had to fend for themselves. Katherine and Egill mentioned being able to make some alliances with sympathetic teachers who would try to help them with other teachers who had too high expectations or demands. However Johann mentioned that he failed out of secondary school in his last year because his parents and teachers kept telling him from the beginning of the year that he was going to fail. Without a support network and with unreasonable expectations, Johann lost hope.

Ultimately, the participants in this study felt that they were rarely in the ideal learning environment. Often they felt isolated or like outcasts. The aforementioned Icelandic study on dropout states that the government allocates resources for students with special needs (Blondal, Jónasson, & Tannhäuser, 2011). Special needs students are often defined as those students with either learning disabilities or physical disabilities. In my view, the young people in this study, who were called intelligent, yet experienced significant academic struggles, had fewer resources than their fellow students because they were expected to achieve academically without being taught how to do so. The participants in this study found themselves in the unique position of being expected to achieve at the highest levels, yet having very few tools with which to do so.

4.2 The Autoethnographic Study

4.2.1 Question 1.

“What have I experienced in terms of difficulties with academic achievement in secondary school, despite being called intelligent?”

When I began secondary school, in the United States, I was thirteen years old. I had skipped the second grade (typically, age 7) because I was already reading on a middle school level (typically, ages 12-14) and doing math on a sixth grade level (typically, age 11) while I was in the first grade at age 6. I was younger than almost everyone in my school so my teachers and parents held me to an incredibly high standard and had great expectations for my academic achievement. I had finished the eighth grade, at age twelve, with high grades and had scored in the top ninety-nine percentile in the statewide reading, math and science tests. In addition to that, I was given an award for my poetry writing and recitation, by one of our United States Congresspersons, in an auditorium full of my future secondary school classmates and teachers. The pressure on me to achieve academically was excruciatingly high.

My first semester of secondary school came as a complete shock. My mother was an English teacher at my high school and her classroom was two doors down from my English teacher. The freshman English class was mandatory for all students in the first year of secondary school. On the first day of class, my English teacher gave us an evaluation form and instructed us to rate our writing, reading and comprehension abilities. Of course, having been called a genius for my entire life, I wrote that my abilities were superlative. This English teacher expressed extreme pleasure at the end of

the semester when she called me into a meeting and told me that I had gotten a D- in her class. At my school, the highest grade was an A+ and the lowest but passing grade was a D-. She told me and my mother that I deserved to fail but she had compassion for my ambition to attend Yale University and did not fail me.

At the meeting with my mother, this English teacher brought out my self-evaluation and said, "How could you call yourself a superlative reader/writer?" I was devastated by this. It made me not want to go to school anymore. School, which had been my sanctuary, and the place where my ego was stroked the most and where I had effortlessly exceeded beyond expectations, had become my nightmare.

How could I almost fail English, when my mother was teaching English two doors down and I had received awards for my ability to write, read and comprehend? I have come to realize, from doing the research for this thesis, that I did not have effective study habits, at the time. I had a negative attitude toward my school because I was taught that I was too intelligent for my classes. I was overconfident in my ability to achieve academically without effort because I had experienced not having to make the same effort as my classmates in order to achieve academically. I did not know how to approach mandatory subjects which I found uninteresting.

I hated that English class. I thought it was boring. I hated slowly reading along with the other students in my class and endlessly going over points that I had already understood the first time I skimmed the page. I always read ahead of my classmates while the class read aloud. Often I was finished with the text long before the rest of the class had gotten through a quarter of the text. I would sit bored at my desk, sometimes doodling, sometimes unconsciously singing to myself under my breath, while the class plodded along. To my teacher (and classmates) I was sometimes a distraction. My parents and teacher could not understand why someone who was so intelligent could not manage to get an A+ in a ninth grade English class.

Through this research, I realized that my parents and teachers gave me expectations and compliments far more often than giving me the tools to survive the rigors of secondary school. I had taught myself how to charm teachers, how to contribute to class discussions so that my teachers would enjoy having me in their classroom and how to do just enough work to get the grades to meet those expectations in elementary school. On the other hand, I never learned how to approach the diversity of subjects and learning situations that I encountered in secondary school.

There were plenty of resources for students with learning disabilities in my school. Some students had personal assistants who sat next to them in their classes in order to help them learn and bring them up to the level of the other students. I never had such help. It was expected that I inherently knew how to master each subject, regardless of its interest to me, regardless of its level of difficulty, regardless of the teacher's ineffective teaching strategy and regardless of its connection to my daily life. The difficulties I experienced were caused by being expected to know things and know how to do things that I had never been taught, because my parents and teachers relied upon my past performance in elementary school and could not see that I needed to learn how to work hard, just as my classmates had learned, in order to achieve academically in secondary school.

4.2.2 Question 2.

What situations typically influenced or affected my ability to achieve academically in secondary school?

Throughout secondary school, I was known as the smart guy. My teachers often pointed to me as a leader in my classes because of my perceived intelligence. Of course, many of the students in my school resented me because of this. This caused me to have great isolation. In my isolation, like some of the participants in my study, I turned to other things to escape both the pain of not being able to achieve academically all the time without effort and the incongruence of being expected to achieve academically (in every subject) without having the tools to do so. The main activity I engaged in, instead of studying, was playing video games. Fortunately, because of my young age in secondary school, I did not engage in some of the more damaging activities reported by the participants in this study, because I was not exposed to these activities.

My mother was seemingly much more supportive of me in my struggles than the relatives of the participants in this study supported them, so I could communicate with her about some of my difficulties. When my mother saw me struggling, she tried to help me to figure out ways to approach the subjects that I either found difficult or uninteresting. The main problem was, as was the case with the participants in my study, my ego was tied to being able to excel academically without effort, so the harder that I worked, the more unintelligent that I felt. I hardly felt satisfaction from having achieved an excellent grade because of working

hard. The greatest satisfaction that I felt in secondary school was when I could get the highest grades with the least effort.

Like the participants in my study, I hated many aspects of school. I hated the school system itself for its failure to attend to my needs as a young person who was constantly told he was intelligent yet struggled academically. I hated the school system for not understanding the paradox of labeling me as intelligent because of my effortless achievement while expecting me to work hard in order to achieve. I desperately wanted to drop out of school but legally I could not because I only turned sixteen in my last year of secondary school (which in the United States is the age at which one can legally leave school). Besides, my mother would not let me leave school.

With tremendous amounts of fights with and threats from my parents and conferences with teachers, I managed to graduate from secondary school as the fourth highest-ranking student in my class. Of course, my parents and some of my teachers told me that I could have been first in my class, if only I had worked harder. Unfortunately, because my specific problem was hardly ever directly addressed, I brought the same inability to approach difficult or uninteresting subjects to my university and I struggled tremendously in those subjects and almost failed out.

4.2.3 A Brand New Start

I come from a family of great academic achievers. My grandfather was a highly regarded surgeon and psychiatrist at a time when African-Americans, in the United States, were being systematically oppressed and were often being denied a standard education. My distant cousin, W.E.B. Dubois, was one of the founders of the N.A.A.C.P. and the first African-Americans to get a doctorate from Harvard University. My sister, who was called hard-working far more often than she was called intelligent, had seamlessly acquired a bachelor's degree, law degree, master's degree in business and law professor's degree, while I, the "genius" of the family, had only managed to struggle through a bachelor's degree from Yale University.

I wanted to go back to school to get a master's degree to prove to myself that I was capable of managing the rigors of graduate school. I wanted to achieve academically. Apart from that, I really enjoy learning new things. When I began the master's in international education program at the University of Iceland, I was faced with my old demons. I did not know how to approach subjects that were difficult for me to comprehend immediately or which I found uninteresting. I did not know how to sit in a

class, when the learning pace was slower than I could handle or when the material seemed uninteresting or unnecessary. Once again, I hated being in school. I hated some of my classes and I hated the University of Iceland for being so bureaucratic and not being able to attend to my needs as an intelligent student who struggles to achieve academically. I wanted to drop out of the master's program. Fortunately, as she had always done in the past, my mother talked me out of it.

My only choice was to face these gaps in my ability and find out how to improve them so that I could achieve academically. In doing so, I could also help other people who found themselves in my situation (the participants in this study, for example). I wanted to see if it was possible to change my approach to learning difficult things.

Was the ability to master certain subjects innate, as I had been taught, or could I learn to approach difficult or uninteresting subjects with effective strategies and a positive attitude?

4.2.4 The Autodidact in Me

I knew that I loved to learn new things. I used to walk around with encyclopedias as a child and read them from cover to cover until I could spout out random facts to my family members or beat them at the games of "Scrabble" and "Trivial Pursuit". I knew how to learn things that I wanted to learn and that were easy to learn. Now I wanted to teach myself how to learn things that were not easy to learn. When I examined my answers to those two questions from the phenomenological study, I realized that I did not truly understand how intelligence worked. I went to the internet to find answers.

I began my journey to improve my learning strategies and attitudes by watching documentaries on intelligence, how people learn and how the brain works. The first documentary I watched was a three-hour film, produced by the BBC, called, "The Human Mind". The film begins with the premise that "...by discovering how our mind works, we can improve our learning power and unlock our true potential" (Hill, 2003). This was the sentence that I was searching for.

The documentary covered various topics in the emerging union of neuroscience and education. One of the most poignant subjects in the documentary was a study by Oxford University of elementary school students who were struggling with certain subjects. After a few weeks of taking Omega3 tablets, many of the students who were struggling academically began making dramatic improvements in their academics.

The subjects' reading skills, memory and concentration improved while taking the Omega3 tablets (Hill, 2003). Immediately, I began taking Omega3 tablets. The information in the documentary encouraged me to continue to seek ways to improve my learning strategies. Because others had done it, it meant to me that I was not necessarily born not being good at certain subjects. I could improve my ability to master subjects which I found difficult or uninteresting. My attitude toward learning these things improved upon watching this documentary. I finally felt like it was worth it to put in the extra effort to learn things which I initially found difficult to grasp.

I watched many more documentaries on the brain and how people learn – in fact tens of hours of them. All of these documentaries helped to change my mind about the innate nature of intelligence. These documentaries chipped away at my belief that I was born with the ability to master certain subjects while other subjects would always be excruciating to approach. I challenged myself to learn subjects that had always frustrated me (and I thought I hated). For example, although I am a musician, I have always hated music theory, because I thought it was boring. I had taught myself how to get around learning music theory by developing a strong ability to pick up music by ear. In the past, I refused to learn the notes on the bass clef of piano/vocal music, because the sight of the bass clef frustrated me and made me not want to play music. It reminded me of tedious drills in boring music classes in elementary school. With my new and improved attitude, I sought to master music theory and even learn physics while I was at it.

Although my attitude toward learning new things had changed, I still had not learned effective strategies to approach learning subjects which I found difficult or uninteresting. This was the next hurdle in my journey to becoming a more effective learner. I was used to being frustrated by learning difficult things, so I began to think that all of the hours of documentaries that I had watched were merely touting pseudo-science, since I had developed a healthier attitude yet could not quickly master difficult subjects. I had sat down in front of some sheet music to learn the notes of the bass clef and I could not magically learn them, like the little boy in "The Human Mind" documentary who seemed to have magically improved his reading by eating fish oil pills (Omega3). Like many of the subjects in the research article, "Students' Resistance to Change in Learning Strategies Courses", I did not know what to change in order to become a more efficient learner (Dembo, 2004).

When I came to this frustrating point in my journey to become a better learner, I was also coding the transcripts of the phenomenological study. I had found the pattern of “lack of hard work” as the most cited reason for academic failure among the participants. I approached my thesis supervisor with my findings and told him that I had found the answer to my research questions: “The participants in the study were not working hard enough!” Insightfully, my thesis supervisor asked me to challenge my ideas about “hard work” and suggested that I read a book called, “Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else”.

In the book, “Talent is Overrated” the author, Geoff Colvin, argues that the greatness achieved by some of the world’s most preeminent performers is not necessarily due to innate ability but can be attributed to what Colvin refers to as “deliberate practice” (Colvin, 2008). The features of Colvin’s theory of deliberate practice are: it has to be designed specifically to improve one’s performance, the practice can be repeated often, a mentor or tutor needs to be present to provide continuous feedback on results, it requires great demands, and it is not inherently enjoyable (Colvin, 2008). The author researched the lives of Mozart, the composer, and Tiger Woods, the golfer, and found that their ascension to the top of their fields was preceded by their implementation of “deliberate practice” (Colvin, 2008, p. 25-31).

I examined my own small ascension to great academic achievement in elementary school in light of Colvin’s “deliberate practice”. Had I been born able to excel in the arts and the humanities? I mapped out my childhood, as Colvin had done with Mozart and Tiger Woods, and realized that my mother started teaching me how to read, write and comprehend at an early age. Colvin writes about Tiger Woods’ and Mozart’s fathers being instrumental in the development of their exceptional abilities. My mother was instrumental in the development of my abilities. Tiger Woods father was also a golfer and Mozart’s father was a composer and pianist. In addition to being an English teacher, my mother is an actress.

I grew up going to rehearsals with her, helping her to memorize the text from her plays, listening to her recite poetry and ultimately learning to memorize, recite and comprehend. I did my first production at the age of three and I had to know my lines in order to do the part. By the time I started elementary school at the age of five, I had spent hundreds, if not thousands of hours, improving my performance, repeating and memorizing texts, getting feedback from my mother (and other actors and audiences),

taking on demanding roles (for a toddler) and a lot of the times, it was not fun. Therefore, it should not have been a surprise to anyone that I was far ahead of most of my classmates in elementary school and that I was often bored.

Coming to the conclusion that some of my early abilities could be attributed to “deliberate practice” was a huge relief for me. I found that my ego was not bruised at all. More than needing to feel more intelligent than my classmates was a need to tackle my inability to learn difficult or uninteresting subjects without huge amounts of frustration and resistance. I decided to learn more about hard work to see if I could turn myself into a more efficient learner. The next book I found was, “The Talent Code” by Daniel Coyle. Coyle writes about the concept of “deep practice” which is similar to Colvin’s “deliberate practice” (Coyle, 2009). Colvin approaches hard work from the standpoint of neuroscience and writes about findings which argue that “...every human skill...is created by chains of nerve fibers carrying a tiny electrical impulse...when we fire our circuits in the right way...our myelin responds by wrapping layers of insulation around that neural circuit, each new layer adding a bit more skill and speed” (Coyle, 2009, p. 5). Myelin is a neural insulator whose role is to wrap “...nerve fibers the same way that rubber insulation wraps a copper wire, making the signal stronger and faster by preventing the electrical impulses from leaking out” (Coyle, 2009, p. 5). The idea of my brain changing the harder that I worked excited me and encouraged me to develop my own version of deliberate practice.

I read more books and articles and watched more documentaries and videos on Ted.com on the subject of hard work, “deliberate practice”, time management, and study strategies in order to identify the methods which I found the most interesting and effective. A researcher named, M. H. Dembo, conducted research on “Students’ Resistance to Change in Learning Strategies Courses”. In his article, he mentions prior research which found that “...the more successful the students are in implementing strategies that lead to personal control of their learning, the more likely they are to be successful learners” (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990, p. 82). Now that I knew what it took to become a successful learner and that I could become a successful learner, I was determined to become one.

4.2.4.1 Implementing the Strategies

The book, “The Winner’s Brain”, mentioned that meditation could reduce distraction and increase awareness (Brown, Fenske, & Neporent, 2010). This strategy appealed to me because I love to meditate. I tried out this

theory by attempting to read articles about physics. I found myself distracted by the complexity of the concepts in the physics' articles, before I meditated. However, after I meditated for fifteen minutes, then read, I found it easier to focus and comprehend. I used two tips from the book, "Effective Learning in Classrooms": keeping a journal and "making learning an object of learning" (Watkins, Carnell, & Lodge, 2007, p. 129). In my journal, I wrote about the things that I learned and I wrote about the situations in which I learned (time, place, environment) in order to develop the ideal learning environment and the most efficient strategies.

I found that watching videos on Ted.com about various subjects, which had previously eluded my attention or understanding, gave me the spark to read more about those subjects. I discovered that educational computer games, which gave constant feedback on my performance and which I could tweak to make more challenging, the more I learned, would become an essential part of my strategy to develop skills that required repetition. In the past, I tried to learn music theory by using bland music theory books which gave no feedback on my performance and were structured so that if I skipped ahead out of boredom, I would miss important parts and have to go back to the beginning. When I discovered music theory computer games online, I used them to finally learn the bass clef, for example, in a matter of hours, rather than the years of struggle and avoidance that it took me to try to learn the bass clef in the past.

For each thing that I wanted to learn, I discovered a way to approach it which would maximize my comprehension and retention and keep my attention. I made plans and lists for large learning projects, such as learning the different intervals and scales of the piano. I divided my time between watching videos, reading, playing educational games, meditating, writing in my journal, and reflecting on what I learned. Ultimately, I started viewing learning new things as a challenge rather than a chore.

5 Discussion and Implications

5.1 Introduction

My purpose in conducting an autoethnographic study alongside the phenomenological study was to put myself into the shoes of my participants. Although I already felt like I belonged to their subculture of young people who were told they were intelligent by parents and teachers yet experienced significant academic struggles in secondary school, there has been a greater amount of time between my struggles in secondary school and the struggles of my participants. Also, I managed to complete a bachelor's degree and pursue a satisfying career, which is something that the participants in my study have yet to do. I wanted to know how difficult it would be for me to change my ineffective approach to learning difficult or uninteresting things and compare that to the academic struggles that the participants in the phenomenological study discussed.

It could be argued that young people, who were called intelligent, yet struggled to achieve academically in secondary school, do not have to be lumped into one group because many schools do offer remediation for students who are struggling academically. The problem with the acceptance of the status quo, in this case, was illuminated for me by the participants in my phenomenological study and by my autoethnographic study. These students were unique because their ego was connected to their intelligence. They were called intelligent by parents and teachers at least in part because of their ability to do well in elementary school without seeming to work hard. This assumption of academic achievement, regardless of effort, seems to have led to an overconfidence in the participants in my study (and myself as well) which often hampered their ability to achieve academically in secondary school. It is often a requirement for students to work harder in secondary school to achieve academically than in elementary school. Without an efficient approach to learning difficult and uninteresting subjects, it would have been difficult for the participants in my study to achieve academically in those subjects.

5.2 Interpretation of Findings

Ultimately, I found that I was able to develop a more efficient approach to learning difficult and uninteresting subjects. It took hundreds of hours of

both practice and research but I managed it. I was also quite determined to complete this challenge, both so that I could be of service to the participants in my study and to contribute to what I view as a gap in the research on high school dropouts and on young people, without learning disabilities, who have academic struggles. The book, "The Talent Code", often mentions passion being a key element of hard work (Coyle, 2009). The author suggests that a person will work hard on improving a talent if he is passionate about it. I was passionate about discovering why the participants in my study and I experienced major academic difficulties despite being called intelligent. This passion kept me forging ahead through the hours of readings and watching documentaries and the setbacks I encountered along the way.

Armed with passion, maturity, motivation, a project supervisor, a supportive family and access to research which suggested to me that I could change my learning strategies, I was able to overcome many of the challenges that the participants in my study encountered in secondary school. Without these tools, could it have been possible for the participants in my study to achieve academically in secondary school? If the participants in my study came to the conclusion that their intelligence was innate because of their ability to achieve academically in elementary school with less effort than their peers, what would indicate to these participants that they could learn to work hard in secondary school in order to achieve academically? The world for them had been divided into two groups: those with an innate ability to achieve academically and those who had to work hard to achieve academically.

In "Students' Resistance to Change in Learning Strategies Courses", the author argues that "It is common for overconfident students to not take responsibility for their failures and instead blame the tests and instructors, justifying their desire of not wanting to change" (Dembo, 2004, p. 6). My research indicates that perhaps teachers and parents were complicit in the development of overconfidence in the participants in my study. This overconfidence, which stemmed from the participants being told that they were intelligent because they could easily master subjects in elementary school, seemed to prevent them from developing proper tools to achieve academically in secondary school.

Perhaps parents and teachers, who call young people intelligent for doing well in elementary school then expect them to maintain that academic achievement without teaching them how to study, do not understand how intelligence works. It is difficult to believe that all of the

participants in this study had horrible parents and teachers who purposely wanted them to fail or drop out secondary school. It is possible that the parents and teachers of the participants in this study were just as surprised by the participants' lack of academic achievement in secondary school as the participants themselves.

The threats that my participants received from parents and teachers did not improve their academic achievement in secondary school. In fact, several of the participants indicated that these threats made it worse. Rather than threatening or punishing the participants in my study because of not meeting the expectations of parents and teachers (and in some cases for not making an effort at all) it seems that their parents and teachers could have taken a more proactive approach. These participants could have benefited from being taught that how to approach difficult or uninteresting subjects and that it was possible to change their ineffective learning strategies.

5.3 Potential Application of the Findings

My purpose in making a documentary (<http://youtu.be/UOmL-K8p4ig>) of the findings in this research was to raise awareness in young people, who were called intelligent, yet found themselves struggling to achieve academically in secondary school. I view the documentary as a starting point for young people who identify with the participants in my study and I made it in order to raise questions in the minds of those who have experienced similar struggles. I included my autoethnographic study in the documentary in order to demonstrate for young people that it is possible to change one's ineffective learning strategies and negative attitudes toward learning difficult and uninteresting subjects.

Parents and teachers of such young people could find this documentary useful as well. Parents and teachers who have used ineffective threats and pressure to change the behavior of young people who are being called intelligent, yet struggling academically in secondary school could use the results of the findings, as presented in the documentary, to question their approach. The documentary could be an impetus for parents and teachers to at least seek solutions which might better serve these young people and ultimately help them to develop the tools to achieve academically in secondary school.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

My research was limited to five young people, who had all lived in and gone to school in Iceland at some point in their lives. Although two of the participants spent the majority of their school careers outside of Iceland, it is still possible for some observers of this research to see its findings as peculiar to Iceland. Personally, I do not subscribe to this belief because I grew up in the United States and developed the same overconfidence that the participants of the study developed as a result of being called intelligent by my parents and teachers because my academic achievement in elementary school appeared effortless.

When I sought out participants for this research, using social media, I received responses from people in several different countries in Europe and North America. Because of time, limited financial resources, and a desire to maintain a general aesthetic throughout the film (by using the same camera) I had to limit my study to participants whom I could film and interview in person. However, I had to make one exception and interview one participant using Skype (internet video). Ultimately, the quality of internet video could have been distracting had all of the subjects been interviewed via Skype in order to increase the diversity of the subjects.

When I worked on the proposal for this thesis project, one issue that was brought to my attention by several professors was how to gauge whether or not a participant was indeed intelligent. There are proponents of intelligence tests, who defend these tests as accurate predictors of academic ability (Clarizio, 1979). The participants in my study could have been subjected to intelligence tests in order to be included. This could be a useful feature of a future study that seeks to compare scores on intelligence tests with the participants' answers to the phenomenological study. However, there are other researchers whose studies seem to question the role of intelligence in predicting academic achievement (Chamorro-Premuzic & McDougall, 2003). Current research seems to be moving in the direction that personality traits are a greater indicator of academic performance (Chamorro-Premuzic & McDougall, 2003). For me, the question remains unanswered whether or not intelligence should be measured in order to study this phenomenon. The effect of being called intelligent and the expectation of achieving academically because of that intelligence seemed more of a factor in the participants' academic struggles than their measurable intelligence.

The participants in my study appear to belong to a subculture of young people who were called intelligent, yet struggle to achieve academically in

secondary schools. Sævar, one of the participants mentioned earlier, spoke about his group of friends that were all intelligent and had dropped out of secondary school. This common trait was part of the glue that kept this group together. They could empathize with each other and attempt to keep their brains sharp by holding intellectual conversations about complicated subjects while sitting around a table playing cards or going for a drive. I would have liked to delve further into such groups in order to ascertain how to help such groups channel their passion for knowledge into something which would help them achieve their life-goals.

In the societies, in which the participants of my study lived, participation in and completion of school is the primary step to achieving one's life-goals, especially if those goals involve pursuing careers which demand advanced degrees. The problem for the participants was that their schools did not feel like the correct place to address their intellectual and emotional needs. I would have liked to conduct broader research in order to determine whether there was a consensus among the participants on what type of institution could have addressed their needs or whether it was simply a matter of teaching them how to approach difficult or uninteresting subjects. If they knew how to approach such subjects, would they have formed groups of intelligent outcasts?

The participants in my study mentioned not working hard and dealing with poor school systems as the primary reasons for their academic failures. These commonalities between them suggest that their shared perception of why they struggled to achieve academically is possibly correct. Are there other factors, which they did not mention, that contributed to their academic struggles? As stated earlier, academic failure and dropouts among secondary school students has been researched from many perspectives. Although it was beyond the scope of this study (because of time and resources), it could have been enlightening to go back to these individuals, once the commonalities between them were established, to assess whether or not other factors, which have been researched, played a part in their academic struggles.

I experienced tremendous benefits from undertaking the autoethnographic study and from having conversations with these young people about their academic struggles. I feel that my research will have a long-term benefit on my approach to difficult or uninteresting material, as I have already noted many changes in my attitude and approach to such material. Did the participants notice any lasting changes from discussing their academic struggles and from participating in a documentary about

their academic struggles? One of the participants decided to re-enroll in secondary school shortly after his participation in the documentary. Will focusing on his attitudes and academic struggles help him in his journey to achieve academically in secondary school? Was participation in this documentary enough of an impetus for him to seek methods for approaching uninteresting subjects? These are questions that I would have liked to address in this study.

Another possible limitation of this study is critical distance from both the participants and myself as autoethnographer. Could the participants' responses have been interpreted more critically? Critical interpretation is always a possibility when conducting qualitative research. As a researcher, I could have pressed the participants further to gauge whether there were underlying causes of their academic failures which they were avoiding or oblivious of. Ultimately, I took the advice given in "InterViews", which says, "If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, bls. xvii). In order to answer my research questions, my priority was to develop a picture of how the participants processed the relationship between being called intelligent and having academic struggles. Then I analyzed their responses using the prevailing research rather than using my knowledge of the established research to guide my questioning of the participants

In order to understand how the participants viewed their world, in the early stages of planning the interviews for this research project, I decided to hone my skills as a compassionate qualitative researcher. More of my research time was spent reading books on qualitative interviewing and autoethnographic research than on dropouts and academic failure. I did not want to be a biased interviewer who pushed his subjects to comply with the established research. As the book, "InterViews" suggested, I conducted practice interviews on subjects in the target population (who were not a part of the study) in order to sharpen my listening skills, practice asking follow-up questions and to develop the two main questions I would ask the participants in my study. I felt that this approach ultimately led to a more open dialogue with my participants and a more honest self-evaluation than if I had come to the interviews armed with "the facts" of high school dropouts and academic failure.

"The deliberate use of the subjective perspective need not be a negative bias; rather, the personal perspectives of interviewees and interviewer can provide a distinctive and receptive understanding of the everyday life world....A plurality of interpretations enriches the meanings of the everyday

world, and the researcher as a person is the most sensitive instrument available to investigate human meanings. The explorative potentialities of the interview can open to qualitative descriptions of new phenomena” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 171). As a researcher, who identified with the subjects of my study, my perspective is, of course, subjective. I wanted to establish the existence of the phenomenon of young people being called intelligent, yet struggling to achieve academically. In order to do this, I put myself in the shoes of my participants, both by studying myself and by empathizing with their struggles. In doing so, I felt that I was able to paint a clear picture of why the participants and I felt that we struggled to achieve academically in secondary school. I was able to do this both by citing established research which backed up each of the participants’ main claims and by using more research to address my own attitudes and lack of tools which, I felt, caused my academic struggles in the past.

The prior research on dropouts and academic failure has focused on the individual claims of the participants in my study (school was boring, some subjects were too difficult to master with limited effort, being called intelligent made them overconfident toward school, and pressure from parents to achieve academically was overwhelming) but has not formally tied these commonalities together in order to establish the phenomenon of young people who were called intelligent, yet struggled to achieve academically in secondary school (particularly in Iceland). As a subjective researcher, I was able to string together the participants’ attitudes and reasons for academic failure with my own to establish the existence of the phenomenon of young people who were called intelligent, yet struggled to achieve academically in secondary school. Of course, my research and conclusions are open to more subjective interpretations and analyses. In my view, one of the goals of qualitative research is to continue to open doors for greater understanding from different perspectives. This research offers one perspective. If others glean different meanings from this research, which lead to a greater understanding of why young people who are called intelligent, yet struggle to achieve academically, then this research has served its purpose.

6 Conclusion

Working on this thesis project has been an incredibly fascinating journey for me. I have a renewed desire to tackle many of the subjects that eluded me when I was in secondary school. I no longer view learning difficult things with intense frustration. When I encounter a topic that I do not immediately comprehend, I devise a strategy to learn that topic by breaking it down into small parts and allowing myself to feel the gratification of achieving those benchmarks that I set. My attitude toward learning difficult and uninteresting things has improved dramatically and I no longer associate hard work with not being intelligent. Ultimately I learned that I discovered that my hyperactivity, curiosity and defensiveness against boredom were not the bane of my existence as I once believed. At last, I am able to view these characteristics as great strengths which underlie a voracious desire to learn as much as possible in the most efficient way.

All of the participants in my study expressed great regret at not being able to achieve academically in secondary school. All of the participants had to change their goals for the future, which at one time included pursuing careers which required advanced academic degrees. I feel that this is unfortunate and does not have to be the case. Because of this research, I firmly believe that the participants in my study can learn how to address their academic struggles and could probably go on to excel in their desired fields.

Each one of the participants in my study expressed gratitude and a sense of relief for being able to discuss their struggles in secondary school despite being called intelligent. As I discovered, back in the coffee shop, having one's struggles acknowledged and being able to connect to others with the same struggles can be an impetus for change. I feel it is incumbent upon school systems to take this special type of student into account. Perhaps there are countless young people who have been called intelligent all their lives who are burdened by unrealistic expectations from teachers and parents to achieve academically in secondary school yet who have very few tools with which to achieve and do not know that they can develop proper methods. More research can be done in this area in order to help school systems identify students that are at risk for dropping out or having major academic struggles because of overconfidence and not knowing how to approach difficult subjects.

This thesis project presents many options for future research. More phenomenological studies can be conducted with a greater amount of participants to identify a broader picture of this phenomenon. Ethnographic studies can be conducted about the social groups formed among students who drop out of secondary school because they felt unchallenged by the environment. It could be possible to develop quantitative questionnaires for school systems to help them identify overconfident students earlier in their school careers, before they experience academic struggles, in order to intervene. Upon further investigation, it seems that my ninth grade English teacher used her questionnaire as a guide in order to detect my overconfidence toward learning. Perhaps if an intervention had taken place before I almost failed her class, I could have learned how to approach classes like hers without suffering the emotional setback of getting a D-.

My autoethnographic study taught me that I could change my approach toward learning difficult or uninteresting things, despite once believing that it was not possible. More research can be done to see the effectiveness of teaching students, who have already experienced academic failure or who have dropped out, useful learning strategies and if those strategies can be maintained or evolve over time. Ascertaining whether it is possible to reengage students who have dropped out of school by having them participate in a project aimed at assessing their attitudes toward school and learning could be useful to educational research. Is it possible to develop a comprehensive strategy to address the needs of students, who have been called intelligent, yet struggle to achieve academically, or must a unique plan be created for each student in order to change his ineffective strategies? This is another question which might be answered with further research.

Although most of my focus has been on the participants in this study, their criticisms of their school systems should not be ignored. Is school actually that boring and why? Is it simply a matter of teaching some students effective learning strategies or are some school systems embracing curricula and teachers which discourage even the most motivated students from learning? We could come closer to answering these questions with more research.

In closing, it is my suggestion that the academic community does more research to realize the scope of this problem and ultimately develop strategies to address it.

7 Bibliography

- Minna menntuð en við hédum* (S. Sharp, "Trans"). (3. July 2010). retrieved 5. October 2011 from Visir.is: <http://www.visir.is/minna-menntuð-en-vid-heldum/article/2010138048371>
- Dropout Rates*. (2011). Sótt 11. November 2011 frá National Center for Education Statistics: <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>
- Aronson, J., Good, C., & Fried, C. B. (2000). Reducing the Effects of Stereotype Threat on African American College Students by Shaping Theories of Intelligence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 113–125.
- Blackwell, L. S., Trzesniewski, K. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2007). Implicit Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition: A Longitudinal Study and an Intervention. *Child Development*, 246-263.
- Blondal, K. S., Jónasson, J., & Tannhäuser, A.-C. (2011). Dropout in a Small Society: Is the Icelandic Case Somehow Different? Í S. Lamb, E. Markussen, R. Teese, N. Sandberg, & J. (. Polesel, *School Dropout and Completion: International Comparative Studies in Theory and Policy* (bls. 233-251). London: Springer.
- Blöndal, K. S., Jónasson, J., & Tannhäuser, A.-C. (2011). Dropout in a Small Society: Is the Icelandic Case Somehow Different? Í S. Lamb, E. Markussen, R. Teese, N. Sandberg, & J. (. Polesel, *School Dropout and Completion: International Comparative Studies in Theory and Policy* (bls. 233-251). London: Springer.
- Brown, J., Fenske, M., & Neporent, L. (2010). *The Winner's Brain: 8 Strategies Great Minds Use to Achieve Success*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press.
- Canadian Council on Learning. (2009). *No "Drop" in the Bucket: The High Costs of Dropping Out. Lessons in Learning*. Ontario: Canadian Council on Learning.
- Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & McDougall, F. (2003). Personality, cognitive ability, and beliefs about intelligence as predictors of academic performance. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 47-64.
- Choi, H., & Yang, M. (2011). The effect of problem-based video instruction on student satisfaction, empathy, and learning achievement in the Korean teacher education context. *Higher Education*, 551-561.

- Clarizio, H. F. (1979). In defense of the IQ test. . *School Psychology Review*, 79-88.
- Clayson, D. E. (2005). Performance Overconfidence: Metacognitive. *Journal of Marketing Education* , 122-129.
- Colvin, G. (2008). *Talent is overrated : what really separates world-class performers from everybody else*. New York: Portfolio.
- Coyle, D. (2009). *The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches Second Edition*. Lincoln, Nebraska: SAGE Publications, Inc .
- Dembo, M. (2004). Students' Resistance to Change in Learning Strategies Courses. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 2-11.
- Edwards, K. (2009). Misdiagnosis, the Recent Trend in Thinking about Gifted Children with ADHD . *The New Zealand Journal of Gifted Education*, 29-44.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. .. (January 2011). *Autoethnography: An Overview*. Sótt 3. October 2011 frá Forum: Qualitative Social Research: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>
- Fallis, R. K., & Opatow, S. (2003). Are Students Failing School or Are Schools Failing Students? Class Cutting in High School. *Journal of Social Issues*, 103–119.
- Hill, D. (Leikstjóri). (2003). *The Human Mind* [Kvikmynd].
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews : learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Mangels, J. A., Butterfield, B., Lamb, J., Good, C., & Dweck, C. S. (2006). Why do beliefs about intelligence influence learning success? A social cognitive neuroscience model. *Social Cognitive & Affective Neuroscience*, 75-86.
- Merriam-Webster. (2012). *Subculture - Definition*. Sótt 18. January 2012 frá Merriam-Webster: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subculture>
- Moran, A. A. (2010). *Students' Attitudes toward High-Stakes Testing and Its Effect on Educational Decisions*. Sótt 22. May 2012 frá Proquest LLC.:
[javascript:popUpExt\('http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_)

r=Z39.88-

2004&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:dissertation&res_dat=xri:pqdiss&rft_dat=xri:pqdiss:3416297');

- Mueller, C. M., & Dweck, C. S. (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 32-52.
- Perez-Studdard, A. K. (2010). *Failing our best and brightest: Are eligibility criteria related to the underachievement of gifted high school students?* Sótt 23. May 2012 frá Proquest.com:
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/192943033?accountid=28822>
- Princiotta, D., & Reyna, R. (2009). *Achieving Graduation for All*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center For Best Practices.
- Renzulli, J. S., & Park, S. (2000). Gifted Dropouts: The Who and the Why. *Gifted Quarterly*, 261-271.
- Tahriri, A., & Divsar, H. (2011). EFL Learners' Self-Perceived Strategy Use across Various Intelligence Types: A Case Study. *Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 115-138.
- Watkins, C., Carnell, E., & Lodge, C. (2007). *Effective Learning in Classrooms*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Weissbourd, R. (2011). The Overpressured Student. *Educational Leadership*, 22-27.
- Zimmerman, B. J., & Martinez-Pons, M. (1990). Student differences in self-regulatory learning: Relating grade, sex, and giftedness to self-efficacy and strategy use. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 284-290.