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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING STYLE, TEACHERS  
PERSONALITY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF GIFTED  
UNDERACHIEVING STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the relationship between learning style, teachers' personality and academic performance of gifted underachieving students. Education is a continuing process to develop an individual's potential towards academic performance with various skills that are holistic and integrated. Gifted underachieving students may not believe that they can do well. A lack of confidence in their skills inhibits them from attempting tasks in which they do not believe they can succeed, therefore this study examine the causes of underachievement as well as characteristics of gifted underachievers as they may seem rebellious, show marked hostility towards adult figures and general distrust of adults among others. In addition, the influence that learning style and teachers' personality have on academic performance of gifted underachieving students were discussed as well as meaning and concept of variables of interest such as gifted underachievers, learning styles, teachers' personality and academic performance. It was concluded that if unchallenging scholastic environments produce underachieving gifted students, then providing intellectual challenge and stimulation at all grade levels should decrease underachievement. Finally, it was recommended that teachers should design teaching and learning methods that are best suited for the individual style of each student. Furthermore, students' thinking style should be included in the teacher education programme. Such knowledge will enable teachers to*

*develop effective teaching methods and pedagogical strategies to respond to the diverse thinking styles of students in science classroom.*

**Keywords:** Learning style, Teachers' personality, Academic performance, Gifted underachievers.

### **Introduction**

As the drive for teaching, understanding and higher order thinking gains momentum in our schools and society, it has being discovered that there is need for deeper investigation into the conditions necessary for its success. Since teachers' knowledge and beliefs are important factors in determining the effect of any educational endeavour, it is important to study them in the context of teaching thinking. Despite the attention paid to a broad definition of outcomes, however, academic performance remains central. There is no question that much is expected from our education system in terms of preparing future citizens, workers, and leaders. To that end, schools are expected to influence students' learning, socialization, and even vocational preparedness.

Attempts have been made by many researchers to tackle the complexities surrounding academic performance. Such attempts are the poor academic performances that were recorded both at the secondary and tertiary levels of education in Nigeria by Tenibiaje (2009). The performance of students at all levels in educational institutions in Nigeria has attracted much criticisms from all and sundry from time immemorial. The decline in the academic performance of students in Nigerian Universities had been observed by Soyinka (1999), when he observed that University system in Nigeria needed restructuring. He went further to say that academic standard had fallen drastically and the quality of graduates being produced by the nation's universities is questionable and subject to re-examination. Poor academic performance of students has been of great concern to educationists, guidance and counsellors in particular. Despite, all guidance programmes and counseling strategies mounted in schools to improve students' academic performances yet poor performances are recorded yearly. Psychologists have put forward a lot of reasons why these disparities in performance exist. Serious attention had been paid to external factors such as type of school, teaching methods, school

location, instructional materials, teachers experience, learning style of students (WAEC, 2005). Lots of money is being spent by many in order to secure good schools either for their children or themselves and those who can afford it even invest on education abroad as they believe this will enhance performance, and which in turn gives an added advantage in terms of securing gainful employment. Opinions vary as to why some students excel academically while others appear to be underachievers.

Education is a continuing process to develop an individual's potential towards academic performance with various skills that are holistic and integrated. Students' academic performance acts as a gauge to measure what have been learnt in a specific duration of time. Each student is unique and different in all aspects. Therefore, employing the correct learning styles is very important in improving academic results. Learning styles could be described as a student's consistent way of responding to and using stimuli in the context of learning. Thus, learning styles are not really concerned with "what" learners learn, but rather "how" they prefer to learn. Similarly Baharin Abu (2007) found out that students' performance increased when learning and teaching done suits their learning styles. If students' learning styles suit the course they are taking, it will have a positive effect on their academic performance (Yahaya & Abdul Karm, 2003). Therefore, students who employ effective learning styles usually obtain excellent academic achievement and are able to secure a place in higher institutions or a position in the work sector. The findings by Mohamad ,Zainol, Abbas , Helan, & Kiranjit (2011) posited that the importance of knowing one's learning styles is essential and crucial for every student. Teachers' teaching styles also need to be adjusted to the students' learning styles so as to build conducive learning and teaching environment. Teachers' teaching styles too need to be adjusted to suit the students' learning styles so that a conducive learning and teaching environment can be developed. Thus, it is vital that students' learning styles be known and used as a guide or reference for teachers to be more sensitive to their students' learning needs (Fedler and Spurlin, 2005).

Several recent researches show that students' academic performance is influenced by their learning styles (Rasimah & Zurina, 2008). In relation to that, it is very important to understand students' learning styles so as to increase students' performance in academic

(Brown et al., 2006; Graf and Kinshuk, 2007). According to the study done by Sriphai, Damrongpanit and Sakulku, (2011) the effectiveness of learning styles is seen also as a factor towards success in the learning process besides effort and hard work. Personality is the sum total of the characteristics that differentiates people, or the stability of an individual's behaviour across different situations. In other words it means those qualities an individual is noted for. Academic performance is defined or regarded as participants' examination grades (Grade point average) at the end of a particular programme. It could also be seen as the level of performance in a particular field of study. Higher scores indicate better academic performance (Egbule 2004). The Nigerian society places great emphasis on education because it is believed to be the only avenue for national development. However, this can only be achieved if undergraduates who are in the citadel of learning get actively involved in academic activities which will enhance their academic performance. Traits on the other hand are "enduring dimensions of personality characteristics which differentiates people from one another" (Colman, 2003 in Daminabo 2008). Traits are therefore the sum total of stable characteristics in a person across different times and situations, which make him or her unique or distinct from others. This agrees with the definition by Mischel 1981, (in Agbakwurus, 2000) which refer to personality traits as consistent differences between the behaviors characteristic of two or more people. It is also defined as "any distinguishable, relatively enduring way in which one individual varies from another" (Guliford, 1959 in Agbakwuru 2000). In line with this, there has been an increasing interest in the big five personality traits and the role they play as regards academic achievement of students. Of particular interest is the role that these traits play in the academic achievement of secondary school students.

Moreover, all these scholars agree in principle that schools do affect academic performance of students. It is generally assumed that students who show better or higher performance in the junior classes of their academic pursuit also perform better in future academic years at degree level. Everyone can be surprised with this assumption if it could be proved scientifically. From the last two decades it has been noticed significantly that there is great addition in research literature and review materials relating to indicators of academic achievement

with much emphasis on this dialogue, whether traditional achievement measures of academic performance are best determinants of future academic gain at university or higher level or innovative measures. Grades are composite measures that account not only for students' content mastery but often for other factors, such as their class participation, attitudes, progress over time, and attendance. Students approach to their own learning style have essential role in educational outcomes (Leung and Weng, 2007) so, the instructor's recognition with learner's learning style is imperative (Leung and Ivy, 2003) for both of them because it makes the learning adorable Abidin, Rezaee, Abdullah, and Singh,(2011) identified that successful students learn in several ways, most of the time, their learning style become dominant on other styles.

Learning styles are simply different approaches or ways of learning. It is probably the simplest definition but it does not explain precisely what an individual need to do. For deeper meaning learning style can be described as the ways in which an individual characteristically discovers, acquires, retains and retrieves information when the need arise. Students actually learn in many ways depending on the teaching styles, some learn easily and quickly by reasoning logically and intuitively while some learn by seeing and hearing. Moreover, individuals can exhibit different learning style in different contexts, and adding on a new credible way of processing information can only enhance a person's ability to make smart decisions in life. In order to help all students become the best thinkers they can be, may require not only expanding people's ideas of what good thinking is, but also finding ways to persuade students of the value of using thinking strategies that may, at first, feel strange and uncomfortable. Hence, identifying own learning styles and strategies could be very beneficial both for students and for teachers. While working on students' learning styles teacher should consider his own learning style because it is likely that this style influences teacher's teaching style.

Teachers are the mainstay of the educational system (Afe, 2000). According to Ferdinand (2007) effective teaching entails a clearly formulated objective illustrated instruction and effective evaluation technique. Literature is replete on studies documenting the relationship between teaching effectiveness and students' academic performance. This mental image, of oneself influences a person's identity, self-

esteem, body image, and role in society. As a global understanding of oneself, self-concept shapes and defines who an individual is, the decisions people make, and the relationships we form. Proper teaching cannot be done in isolation of who the teacher is.

Personality to the layman means how huge or how small an individual is. It also means the individual's skills in handling situations or social interactions. However, personality is much more than these. From the academic point of view, personality means a hypothetical construct used to account for observed irregularities or inconsistencies in the behaviour of an individual that differs from those behaviours of some other individuals (Stand and Wrightsman, 2001). Onyejiaku (2008) also defined it as the organization of human behaviour, the changing nature of personal growth, the psychological and genetic basis of actions, and the motivational and natural emotional determinations and individual's behaviour in certain situations. With these scientific definitions of personality presented above, one can point out some common features that cut across them.

Fauziah, Noran, Yaakub (2005) stated that the appropriate methods and teaching strategies can be evaluated when teaching objectives are met. Syllabus given should be suitable to the situation in which it is to be used. The content of the syllabus has to be appropriate and specifically state what it does. It has to also ensure its attainability to the majority of learners for whom it is intended. As stated by Fauziah et. al (2005), when it comes to achieving the target outcomes, teachers, students and methods are interdependent on each other so as to allow maximum learning. Fauziah et. al (2005) also mentioned that a good method may be useless for a teacher who does not know how to use it. Due to the need of improving the teaching profession as well as academic performance of students, this study focuses on how teacher's personality may influence their teaching effectiveness and assisting the education of the gifted underachievers. Gifted underachievers are those individuals who have been identified to be gifted and who have the potentials to exhibit superior performance on measures of expected achievement, but their actual performance always fall below what their potentials indicate (Reis and McCoach, 2000). By understanding the relationship between personality of teacher, teaching effectiveness and learning style of students, it would help to identify which personality influences their teaching effectiveness, so

that they may use or select the best teaching method that suits their personality to make their teaching become more effective. Effectiveness of teaching depends on how the teacher selected the teaching method. As stated by Fauziah Noran, Yaakub, (2005), it is important for teacher to put into consideration the categories of student to be taught in order to select the appropriate teaching methods because these determine the effectiveness and quality of teaching. The implication is that the suitability of teachers' personality to teaching methods employed will lead to effectiveness in teaching and improvement in academic performance of gifted underachievers.

#### **Meaning and Concept of variables of interest Gifted underachievers**

Gifted underachievers are those who have shown exceptional performance on a measure of intelligence but who, nevertheless, do not perform as well as expected for students of the same age on school related tasks. They may lack the motivation to achieve and will need intervention strategies to enable their giftedness to be identified. Underachievement may result when a gifted student exhibits behaviors that prevent the student from achieving their potential. Most commonly it is defined as a discrepancy between performance and an ability or achievement measure. There are three types of underachievers: those with low grades and test scores despite indication of high ability, low test scores with high grades, low performance despite high test scores in some subjects. Gifted underachievers tend to be particularly sensitive to teachers who are critical, rigid, officious, and unsympathetic (Fine, 1967). There are many teachers who have negative attitudes toward gifted students who resist conformity. Teachers who emphasize order, control, and conformity tend to promote more structured and less innovative styles in their students. Emerick (1992) found that gifted underachievers exhibited independence of thought and judgment, willingness to take risks, perseverance, above-average ability, creative ability, and an intense love for what they were doing.

#### **Learning styles**

Learning is a lifelong process and each individual have distinctive characteristics as personality theorists claim that each individual is unique, similarly, they learns in different way as Reiff (1992) argues that

every learner's attributes are related to his/her learning process, that might be due to biological, psychological or sociological differences. Grasha (1996) elaborated his own learning style questionnaire which is based on social interaction. Learning style is as much important for students as for teachers because both are inalienable as Manochehr (2007) claimed that match between them resulted in better student achievement. Abidin, Rezaee, Abdullah & (2011) identified that successful students learn in several ways, most of the time their learning style becomes dominant over other styles. Many people recognize that each person prefers different learning styles and techniques. Learning styles group common ways that people learn. Everyone has a mix of learning styles. Some people may find that they have a dominant style of learning, with far less use of the other styles. Some examples of learning styles are as follows:

- **Visual (spatial).** Individuals prefer using pictures, images, and spatial understanding.
- **Aural (auditory-musical).** Individuals prefer using sound and music.
- **Verbal (linguistic).** Individuals prefer using words, both in speech and writing.
- **Physical (kinesthetic).** Individuals prefer using their body, hands and sense of touch.
- **Logical (mathematical).** Individuals prefer using logic, reasoning and systems.
- **Social (interpersonal).** Individuals prefer to learn in groups or with other people.
- **Solitary (intrapersonal).** Individuals prefer to work alone and use self-study.

#### **Teachers' personality**

Teachers' personality is a collection of his/her emotions, thoughts and behavioral patterns that are unique to him/her and relatively stable over time. The hope of a teacher's personality is the personality ability (pertinacious, stable, mature, wise, and prestigious) and becomes a teacher having ethics for his or her students in order to emerge a positive attitude for students. Experience shows that problems such as motivation, discipline, social behavior, achievement and continuous study •desire source from a teacher's personality. A teacher

performance can be rated by assessing the measures of general teaching practices such as teaching methods and strategies, classroom management, planning and organization of teaching. It means that personality could be a predictor of job performance as well as for teaching effectiveness. As stated by Curtis and Liying (2001), teacher performance is influenced by the teachers' personality characteristics. Barrick and Mount (1990) mentioned that a great deal of published research selection has been geared towards understanding the relationship between personalities constructs and job performance. Understanding the personality of a teacher and the job performance which is related to the how the teachers conduct their job especially in teaching, throws more light into how the teacher's personality influence teaching effectiveness. The National Policy of Education states, "No Education system can rise above the quality of teachers in the system" (FGN, 2006). There is a need to focus on teachers' adequacy and competency in respect to their pedagogical practices and strategies and mastery of the curriculum and subject content (Chall & Popp, 1990; Stuart, 2004; Rodgers, 2001).

#### **Academic performance**

Academic performance could be described as the standard of success that students are able to achieve based on learning from study, practical skills and experience. Academic performance is a complex student behavior and underlies several abilities, e.g., memory, previous knowledge or aptitude as well as psychological factors such as motivation, interests, temperaments or emotions, to name a few (Deary, Whiteman, Starr, Whalley, & Fox, 2004). Educational psychologists and researchers have argued that there are many determinants of academic performance (Chamorro-Permuzic & Furnham, 2003).

#### **Causes of Underachievement**

Academic excellence is not valued by many students. To avoid such criticism and be accepted by their social group, talented students often perform below expectations. While there are many other issues outside of school that can lead to underachievement, educators have little influence on change in these areas. Instead, people should look at the causes of underachievement that occur within the schools and try to

provide remedy to such deficiencies. One crucial reason why talented students choose not to excel is that the curriculum they encounter is often unchallenging and unmotivating. High ability students can master material at a much faster rate than average students, but they are rarely given the opportunity to do so. Instead of coping with and trudging through their everyday work they simply refuse to do anything. This lack of challenge can be experienced in a child's early years of schooling and translate later into poor work habits. Sometimes gifted students may come in contact with teachers who do not appreciate or recognize their unique talents and abilities. Initially, such students are eager to participate in class, so much so that they may be considered annoying and bossy. Children eventually receive the message that their participation is not valued and their interests are not a concern of the teacher. Such negative feedback can be devastating. Gifted students may not believe that they can do well. A lack of confidence in their skills inhibits them from attempting tasks in which they do not believe they can succeed. For these students it is easier to not try at all. Some other factors recognized to be responsible for underachievement in gifted learners include:

- Low self – concept
- Lack of perseverance
- Lack of sense of purpose
- Inferiority complex
- Family conflicts
- Societal pressure
- Lack of appropriate educational provisions.

#### **Characteristics of gifted underachievers**

In basic terms, underachievement is seen as a discrepancy between a student's academic potential and how he or she is actually performing in school. This potential is often revealed through performance on intelligence and achievement tests, as well as observational data. The disparity between potential and actual performance is often quite noticeable among gifted underachievers.

Characteristics of underachieving gifted students include:

- They show low self – concepts: They are negative in their evaluations of themselves. Their feelings of inferiority may be

demonstrated by distrust, indifference, lack of concern, and even hostility toward others. They believe no one likes them.

- They often feel rejected by their family, because their parents are dissatisfied with them
- Because of a feeling of helplessness, they may take no responsibility for their actions, externalizing conflict and problems.
- They may show marked hostility towards adult authority figures and general distrust of adults.
- They may have an autonomous focus, resistant to influence from teacher or parent.
- They may feel victimized
- They often do not like school or their teachers attitudes toward school also
- They may seem rebellious
- Weak motivation for academic achievement has been noted, and they may lack academic skills.
- They tend to have poor study habits, do less homework, frequently nap when trying to study, and leave more of their work incomplete.
- They are less intellectually adaptive
- They are less persistent, less assertive, and show high levels of withdrawal in classroom situation
- They hold lower leadership status and are less popular with their peers.
- They are often less mature than achievers (e.g. lack of self-discipline, procrastinate, show unwillingness to complete tasks deemed unpleasant, have high distractibility, act highly impulsively and are unwilling to face unpleasant realities).
- They often show poor personal adjustment and express feelings of being restricted in their actions.
- They may not have any hobbies, interests or activities that could occupy their spare time.
- They are often test phobic and have poor test results.
- They tend to have lower aspirations than achievers and do not have a clear idea of vocational goals.
- They are not able to think or plan future goals

- They tend to state their goals very late and often choose goals that are not in line with their major interests or abilities. Often the goals they adopt have been set for them.
- In choosing a career, they show preferences for manual activities, business, sales occupations or anything with a strong persuasive trend, over more socially concerned or professional occupations.

### **The influence that learning style and Teacher's personality have on academic performance of gifted underachieving students**

Students and parents refer often to differences in teacher quality and act to ensure placement in classes with specific teachers. Such emphasis on teachers is largely at odds with empirical research into teacher quality. There has been no consensus on the importance of specific teacher factors, leading to the common conclusion that the existing empirical evidence does not find a strong role for teachers in the determination of academic performance and future academic and labour market success. It may be that parents and students overstate the importance of teachers, but an alternative explanation is that measurable characteristics such as teacher experience, education, and even test scores of teachers explain little of the true variation in quality. Without teachers, educational facilities cannot be expanded. Undoubtedly, the success and quality of any educational system depends on the quantity and quality of teachers' input into the system. Politicians and policy makers at all levels may institute vast new legislated reforms; but without the understanding, support, and inputs of teachers, they will end up in the same dead end as such past reforms (Meier, 1992). Since there is no educational system that can improve better than its teachers, the commitment of teachers to the system is a vital issue. The teachers interpret the aims and goals of education and educate the students in accordance with them. No wonder Darling-Hammond (2000) asserts that the states interested in improving student academic performance should look at the preparation and qualification of the teachers they hire and retain in the profession.

In light of the above, Ogunsaju (1990) argued that one of the things that bother him most, as an individual, is the expectation of teacher effectiveness by the general society while the incentives likely to generate teacher's interests have been virtually absent. It should be

noted that this usually has adverse effects on the quality of teachers' instruction, which consequently reflects in the students' academic performance. Whether educational standard has fallen or not, it is imperative that teachers at various levels of education are committed to their job so as to put in their best in the attainment of school goals. The quality output depends on the quality input, so the success and quality of any educational system depends on the quality and quantity as well as the level of commitment of its teachers. According to Sanders (1999) the single biggest factor affecting academic growth of any population of youngsters is the effectiveness of the individual classroom teacher... The teacher's effect on academic growth dwarfs and nearly renders trivial all other factors that people have historically worried about. Ajayi (1996) buttressing the above claim, reported that classroom teacher is one of the chief determinants of educational achievement, whose academic qualifications, relevant professional training, work experience among others is most significant determinants of students' academic performance. Similarly, teachers at all levels of education play the decisive role in pivoting the growth and the direction of education. It is an acceptable fact that teacher is the most important cog in the educational machine and that teachers are highly instrumental to the success of any educational programme embarked upon by any government. This is because apart from being at the implementation level of any educational policy, the realization of these programmes also depends greatly on teachers' dedication and commitment to their work (Adeniji, 1999).

However, problems from test measurement errors and potential school and classroom selection effects may be even more serious for these types of models than in those that use observable measures, making the interpretation of these as direct estimates of the teacher component problematic. The central estimation problem results from the processes that match students with teachers, and schools. Not only do families choose neighborhoods and schools, but principals and other administrators assign students to classrooms. Because these decision makers utilize information on students, teachers and schools, information that is often not available to researchers or measured with error, the estimators are quite susceptible to biases from a number of sources.

Although there has been considerable debate about the determinants of academic performance among educators, policymakers, academics, and other stakeholders, it is generally agreed that the impact of these determinants vary (in terms of extent and direction) with context, for example, culture, institution, course of study etc. Since not all factors are relevant for a particular context. A good match between students' learning preferences and instructor's teaching style has been demonstrated to have positive effect on student's performance (Harb & El-Shaarawi, 2006).

Clearly in a class where only one instructional method is employed, there is a strong possibility that a number of students will find the learning environment less optimal and this could affect their academic performance. Felder (1993) established that alignment between students' learning preferences and an instructor's teaching style leads to better recall and understanding. The learning styles approach has gained significant mileage despite the lack of experimental evidence to support the utility of this approach. There are a number of methods used to assess the learning preferences/styles of students but they all typically ask students to evaluate the kind of information presentation they are most at ease with. A number of learners are indeed, multimodal, with more than one preferred style of learning in addition to using different learning styles for different components of the same subject.

### **Conclusions**

Most of research on underachievement has focused on characteristics of underachievers, the most important unresolved issue is how to reverse the underachievement of gifted students. Unfortunately, there is no magic solution to the problem of underachievement and a combination of counseling and instructional interventions appears to currently be the most promising option. No one type of intervention strategy appears to be effective for the full range of underachieving gifted students. Because the factors influencing the development and manifestation of underachievement vary, a continuum of strategies and services may be necessary if we are to systematically address this problem. Different types of underachievers may require different combinations of counseling and instructional or curricular modifications. Successful interventions should incorporate both

proactive and preventative counseling and innovative instructional interventions. Future researchers in this field should posit coherent, complete models of gifted underachievement and design interventions in accordance with their proposed models. First, researchers should begin to explore the relationship between classroom practices and academic underachievement. Research exploring the impact of differentiation, acceleration, enrichment, and other curricular modifications on patterns of achievement and underachievement could provide important information for educators. Reis (1998) observed a relationship between unchallenging or inappropriate curriculum in elementary school and underachievement in middle or high school. If unchallenging scholastic environments produce underachieving gifted students, then providing intellectual challenge and stimulation at all grade levels should decrease underachievement. VanTassel-Baska's curriculum development work at The College of William and Mary is a good example of creating intellectually challenging curriculum in a variety of content areas (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2007b).

### **Recommendations**

In view of all the aforementioned points, the researchers hereby make the following recommendations:

- Students will be more successful if they are given tasks that match with their thinking styles (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997)
- Teachers should design teaching and learning methods that are best suited for the individual style of each student.
- Since gifted students leaned toward all the thinking styles, except the internal thinking style, higher than those of underachieving students, they should be given tasks that are more creative, more analytical and more challenging like projects in which they can choose the topics they want to investigate and design the methods to solve problems on their own under the advice and guided support of teachers.
- Teachers should also use other teaching and learning programmes that reflect the diverse thinking style characteristics of the learners in both types of schools.
- More importantly, as these students gradually advance to higher levels and enter the formal operational stage, teachers

should offer a curriculum and instructional method that are appropriate to the level of their cognitive developmental stage.

- The new educational system in Brunei introduced in 2008 which emphasises course work as part of students' assessment will give teachers the opportunity to make changes their teaching and learning strategies. Teachers should introduce tasks that are cognitively more demanding like problem solving and those that involve analysis, synthesis and application in order to develop creative and analytical thinking skills, thus placing less emphasis on teacher-centred and examination-oriented instruction.
- Students' thinking styles should be included in the teacher education programme. Such knowledge will enable teachers to develop effective teaching methods and pedagogical strategies to respond to the diverse thinking styles of students in science classrooms.
- Finally, special attention needs to be paid to the underachievement of underrepresented groups. In 2006, VanTassel-Baska, with assistance of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and the National Association for Gifted Children, organized a conference on low-income promising learners. The proceedings of that conference resulted in the publication of which contained priorities for action in this area (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2007a). This conference and the subsequent publication provide an agenda for promoting talent development among underserved groups. As stated earlier, no single intervention will work with all gifted underachievers. Just as gifted achievers differ from gifted underachievers, gifted underachievers differ from each other.

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