

# How Gifted Indian American Students and Their Families Perceive Factors of Success

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## **Abstract**

*There is a sparsity of research focusing on the experiences of Asian-Indian American students. This study describes how gifted Indian American students and their families perceived factors contributing to students' academic success. Specifically, this study used a qualitative case study design to describe the perceptions of four families. The data collection of open-ended interviews, observations of students during school, and student-selected artifacts were utilized for an in-depth understanding of their perspectives on home, school, culture, and self. Through analysis, the following themes emerged: academic home climate, parents push—in a good way, planning for the future, the gifted label, participants' schools in the United States, teachers matter, values of Indian culture, challenges of living in the United States, the model minority stereotype, parents' educational backgrounds, competition, motivation, and mindset: intelligence results from work ethic. Results indicated that participants believed a confluence of these factors contributed to the students' academic success.*

## **Keywords**

*gifted, Indian American, mindset, internal factors, external factors*

## **1. Introduction**

The student body of American classrooms is changing. The demographics are shifting throughout the United States to include higher percentages of minorities and immigrants. Asian Americans are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, with Indians the third largest sub-group of that population (US Census Bureau, 2010). Educational research however, is not reflecting these changing trends. Farver, Xu, Bakhtawar, Bhada, Narang and Lieber (2007) contend that despite the fact that Asian Americans comprise 16% of the U.S. immigration population, “relatively little is known about them” (p. 185). In-depth studies need to be conducted to reveal the lived experience of these students, without lumping the Asian Indians into the larger Asian category. By looking at Indian American students who have been academically successful in American schools and their parents who have

emigrated from India, much can be revealed and contributed to a growing body of literature surrounding culture, intelligence, and gifted students.

### *1.1 Research Questions*

The four guiding research questions for this study are:

- 1) How do identified gifted Indian American students and their parents perceive various factors influencing the students' academic success?
- 2) How do identified gifted Indian American students and their parents define giftedness?
- 3) How do identified gifted Indian American students and their parents perceive intelligence and its malleability?
- 4) How do identified gifted students and their parents believe their Indian background influences their pursuit of academic achievement?

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Family System Theory*

When considering student perceptions, it is important to look at the parents' views as well. The Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) described how families are systems, comprised of interconnected and interdependent members. Individuals, each with a role to play, impact all other members. Thus, in order to understand an individual, one must look at the entire family.

The influence of families and an "Academic Home Climate" have been studied and linked to academic achievement (Campbell & Verna, 2007; Moon, Jurich, & Feldhusen, 1998). Studies have found correlations between families which focused on being child-centered, supportive of individuality, and close-knit to high achievement in children (Moon, Jurich, & Feldhusen, 1998; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002). Yet family atmosphere cannot be a prescribed list of elements in order to determine success from the members. Families which were child-centered but lacked consistency have been shown to lead to underachievement (Rimm & Lowe, 1988). Since family systems are contextually dependent, complex, and dynamic, there is no one definite structure guaranteed to produce high achievement in children.

### *2.2 Parenting the Gifted and Talented*

Within the complexity of family systems, research has shown that parents, specifically, hold an important role for educational trajectories of gifted and talented (Bloom, 1985; Campbell & Verna, 2007; Goertzel, 1962; Rimm, 1999). Parents have reported feeling a great responsibility of identifying and cultivating their child's talent without over-managing it (Feldman & Piirto, 2002; Garn, Matthews, & Jolly, 2012; Jolly & Matthews, 2014; Morawska & Sanders, 2009). Also, parents of gifted children feel a lack of support in supporting their child's development and often experience negative community response (Morawska & Sanders, 2009). Despite these difficulties, studies have shown how parental values, modeling those values, providing resources and social networks all positively impact a child's talent development.

Studies have shown how in homes of gifted and talented children, parents exhibited the value of

achievement by giving and modeling messages of hard work, perseverance, and productive use of time (Bloom, 1985; Feldman & Piirto, 2002; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002). In addition, how parents convey the concept that abilities are dynamic constructs which require practice, effort, and persistence can lead to an increase in academic motivation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck, 2007, 2012).

### *2.3 Parenting Styles*

Baumrind's (1968) conceptualization of parenting includes parents' beliefs and values about their roles as parents as well as the nature of children. She described three types of parenting styles which exert different amounts of control: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive (and then later added uninvolved). Since the publication of Baumrind's parenting styles, researchers have tried to correlate styles with children's behaviors. Researchers have tried to superimpose parenting style studies cross cultures to understand the relationship of parenting styles and their child's academic achievement, yet results have been limited. The cultural and social milieu affect the parenting and developmental outcomes of children (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Rao, McHale, & Pearson, 2003).

#### *2.3.1 International Studies*

Parental support and encouragement differing in various cultures has been documented. Campbell and Verna (2007) considered the parenting styles of families in Scandinavia, Europe, Asia, and the United States. They concluded that the home environment surrounding all of the high achieving students from the different countries is an important contributing factor to the students' success.

Rao et al. (2003) made a more specific comparison by studying the parenting styles of Chinese parents (n=205) and Indian parents (n=118) in their respective homelands. The results showed many similarities in value systems of placing high importance on academic achievement, collectivist values of attaining success for society at large, and the importance of filial piety.

### *2.4 Immigrant Parents*

Immigrant parents bring their homeland culture into a new dominant one. Parents are influential in guiding their children's behaviors, attitudes, and success in the navigation of these two worlds (Farver, Xu, Bakhtawar, Bhada, Narang, & Lieber, 2007). Farver, Bhadha and Narang (2002) conducted a quantitative study of Asian Indian adolescents (n=180) and European American adolescents (n=180) and their parents. They found that when immigrant parents sought to integrate and acculturate to the dominant culture, while maintaining aspects of their homeland culture, the adolescents had higher academic achievement, self-esteem, and ethnic identity.

### *2.5 Asian Indian Immigrants*

The vast majority of immigrants from India after the 1965 U.S. Immigration Act have a college degree, are middle class professionals, or students from universities. They come seeking opportunities for themselves and their children. Sethna (2004) described how Indian parents impress upon their children the culture of hard work, diligent pursuit of careers which provide prestige and high income—typically medicine, law, business, or engineering—a belief that a person can achieve anything with perseverance, success will arrive with encouragement, environment, and due diligence on the part of the child.

## 2.6 South Asian Views of Intelligence

Research has compared conceptions of intelligence held by individuals from South Asian countries versus those of North America. Results have shown people from South Asian countries view intelligence as incremental, thus their understanding is that intelligence can be increased over time through learning and effort (Heine, Kitayama, Lehman, Takata, Ide, Leung, & Matsumoto, 2001). Through six studies, Rattan, Savani, Naidu and Dweck (2012) compared Indian (n=69) and American (n=79) college students' beliefs on the malleability of intelligence. They found American students were significantly less likely to believe intelligence can be changed over time. These studies indicate that cultural beliefs affect how individuals perceive intelligence and those beliefs impact students' effort and performance.

## 2.7 Mindset Theory of Intelligence

Dweck (2006) posited that individuals either have *fixed* or *growth* views of intelligence. Those with fixed mindsets tend to believe that intelligence is a set entity. They tend to focus on their intelligence and avoid challenges which may result in failure. In contrast, individuals with incremental mindsets embrace challenges as they believe that only through struggle can intelligence grow and develop (Dweck, 2006, 2012). How humans perceive intelligence (which mindset they embrace) has been linked to motivation and academic outcomes (Dweck, 2010; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Blackwell, Trzensniewski, and Dweck (2007) found that students who held fixed mindsets did not associate effort with intelligence. Thus when challenges were presented, they avoided risk-taking tasks. Contrastingly, students with growth mindsets believed that effort activates abilities and these abilities increase over time. Blackwell et al. (2007) concluded that mindsets acted as predictors of academic achievement, higher motivation, higher effort, and less helpless strategies when students confronted challenges. Dweck's theory (2006, 2007, 2010, 2012) on mindset provided the theoretical framework for this study.

## 2.8 The Model Minority Stereotype

Since the 1960's, Asian immigrants have been portrayed in the media as the "model minority" (Petersen, 1966). They have been touted as hard working, academically successful, able to climb the social ladder of society, and free from emotional health issues (Grossman & Liang, 2008; Kitano, 1997; Wong & Halgin, 2006). Unfortunately, this positive depiction does not always equate to attainment; rather it sometimes results in dire consequences (Henfield, Woo, Lin, & Rausch, 2014; Plucker, 1996). Asian Americans have reported high amounts of pressure to reach the academic expectations placed upon them (Henfield et al., 2014; Wong & Halgin, 2006). A study by Ying, Lee, Tsai, Hung, and Wan (2001) revealed that Asian Americans avoid seeking professional help and counselors often overlook their needs.

Over-representation of Asian American students in gifted programs in schools has been documented (Yoon & Gentry, 2009), yet studying this population less than others could be a further example of the model minority stereotype permeating societal thought.

### 2.8.1 Stereotype Threat

Stereotypes about minorities not only can affect individuals' identities and sense of belonging but can have a negative influence upon academic achievement (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). When minority students feel that their achievements are being judged through a stereotypical lens, their performance is often hindered (Perry et al., 2003; Steele, 1999) even when the stereotype is positive (Shih, Ambady, Richeson, Fujita, & Gray, 2002).

### 2.9 Motivation

Studies have shown that challenges such as stereotype threats sometimes act as a motivating force for individuals to persevere (Garrett, Antrop-González, & Vélez, 2010; Worrell, 2012). Motivation has been linked to perseverance, dedication (Urhahane & Ortiz, 2011), and grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Many theories and definitions of giftedness contain components of motivation (Piirto, 1994, 2004; Renzulli, 1986). Studies have shown the connection between individuals' abilities and achievements contain the characteristic of motivation (Dweck, 2010; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Urhahane & Ortiz, 2011). Motivation has been divided into two contrasting types: internal and external.

### 2.10 Competition

The role of competition within public academic settings is not agreed upon, especially for gifted students. Some gifted students in over-competitive environments shut down and become underachievers, while other students thrive in competitive realms only to then quit as they want to avoid the risk of losing in the future (Rimm, 1997). Ozturk and Debelak (2008) contend competition can lead to increased motivation, a healthy self-concept, experience with a competition in the real world, and interactions with role models.

### 2.11 Conclusion

Previous studies offered insights on the external facets of the home (such as parenting), the school (such as the gifted label), the culture and community (such as Asian American immigrants). Some internal constructs such as an individuals' understanding of intelligence have been shown to be culturally linked. Studies on motivation and competition provided additional considerations which tie into an individual's internal characteristics. Yet few studies focused on the perceptions of gifted Indian students and their parents in conjunction with the students' academic success. How these participants view these different aspects and relay their experiences will be the focus of the study.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Case Study

A case study strives to provide an in-depth understanding of a specific contemporary phenomenon within the context of real life (Yin, 2009). For this study, the phenomenon of giftedness for students, of first generation Indian immigrants, who currently attended school in the Midwest region of the United States was the focus. Four instrumental families were chosen to represent the cases. Each case provided triangulating data derived from interviews of parents and their children, direct observations, and

physical artifacts. Then, because there were four cases, which all shared the common characteristic of immigrant Indian families with gifted students, they were considered categorically bound (Stake, 2006). Thematic connections between the cases were revealed and noted.

### 3.2 Procedure

#### 3.2.1 Participant Selection

A purposeful sampling approach was conducted to select four families with gifted children of first generation Indian immigrants. They were chosen based on the following criteria: children with parents who had emigrated from India; families with children who had been identified as gifted through school identification procedures; and families who lived in the Midwest. They all gave informed consent after an explanation of the purpose, potential risks, and benefits of the study. Table 1 contains descriptors of the four cases.

**Table 1. Descriptors of Cases**

Family	Children	Students		Parents' Profession		Region in India	Home Language
		Grade School	Activities	Father	Mother		
Case 1 Yagalla	Suren	11th Local high school	Varsity tennis team, Marching band, Volunteering Science Olympiad,	Applications Manager	Homemaker	Telangana	Telugu
	Trisha	10th magnet STEM school	Robotics, Indian dance, Telugu & Vedic classes, sings Carnatic music	Senior Business Analyst	Homemaker		
Case 2 Rao	Kajol	6th local middle school	Enrichment classes, Robotics, Bollywood dance,			Andra	Telugu

Case 3	Sheela	10th local high school	Telugu & culture classes	Solutions Architect	Business Analyst	Tamil Nadu	Tamil
			School tennis team, Marching band, Science Olympiad, Writing contests, Organizing TED talks Science Olympiad, tennis, art, Indian culture classes Varsity tennis team, Power of the Pen, Volunteering, Sanskrit, Carnatic singing, & Vedic classes				
Case 4	Kareena	11th magnet STEM school	Telugu & culture classes	Software Application Manager	Homemaker	Andra Pradesh/ Tamil Nadu	Tamil
			School tennis team, Marching band, Science Olympiad, Writing contests, Organizing TED talks Science Olympiad, tennis, art, Indian culture classes Varsity tennis team, Power of the Pen, Volunteering, Sanskrit, Carnatic singing, & Vedic classes				

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	Robotics
	team, project
	manager in
	training,
9th	tennis team,
magnet	Hindu
STEM	& Sanskrit
school	classes,
	Carnatic
	singing,
	Volunteering

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### 3.2.2 Site Selection

The location site was an upper-middle class suburb in the Midwest of the United States. Three nearby schools were observation sites: the local middle school, the local high school (both highly rated and regarded as having rigorous curricula), and a magnet STEM high school.

### 3.2.3 In-Depth Interviews

Two semi-structured recorded interviews based on a modified format suggested by Seidman (2006) took place at the family homes. The interview questions were open-ended designed to ask participants to describe experiences and explain their meaning (Stake, 2006), using literature to guide topics. Since the student participants were young, the interview components were combined into an initial 45-60 minute interview and then a follow up 20-50 minute interview. The parents were interviewed with the same two-part structure—one 60-90 minutes and a follow up 30-60 minute session (Seidman, 2006) but had a different protocol.

### 3.2.4 Artifacts

Asking students to choose an artifact to represent themselves as gifted Indian American students, revealed their perceptions of themselves and what being gifted meant to them in an alternative manner. The students were also asked to explain why they chose the artifact.

### 3.2.5 Participant Observations

Collecting data through observation is a key element for understanding phenomena in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). For this study, observing gifted students throughout their day at school provided rich descriptions and understandings of the context of school. As a nonparticipant observer, I followed each student throughout his or her school day, noting the students' classroom behaviors, involvement with different subject areas, peer interactions, and teacher interactions. The observation notes were utilized to initiate dialogue in follow-up interviews to capture the students' perceptions of school experiences.



### 3.2.6 Researcher as Instrument

I have been a private tutor for Indian American students for over ten years. These sessions were not requested for remediation; rather the parents sought me to provide more rigorous reading and writing instruction than the schools provided for their children. They knew I had experience as a middle school, high school, and college English teacher. Since the participants were already familiar with me as their former tutor, an established rapport was relied upon for candid and truthful reports and perceptions.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Throughout the data collection process, notes and descriptions were made using thick, rich descriptions. All of the verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, the observations and follow-up interviews, pictures of the students' chosen artifacts, field notes, and family descriptions were kept securely confidential but referenced throughout the study. The data were uploaded into the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti. Data were coded three times, seeking to link data fragments to a concept. Connections were then sought to identify clusters of meaning, or categories. Categories of home, school, culture, motivation, and intelligence (with the latter two combined into the category of self) were established. Codes were then placed within categories to better reveal the themes within these groupings. Presenting the participants' inner worlds was key for interpretive validity, thus member checking was employed.

A between-case analysis was conducted by noting themes that emerged among the four families. Because of individualistic differences of viewpoints and interpretations, emphasis of factors varied throughout the study. The themes that emerged highlighted the strong prevalence of a topic either with the same or conflicting viewpoints between the family units. This analysis of themes between cases was presented not to generalize beyond the cases but to reveal the complexity of the cases (Creswell, 2013).

## 4. Results: Themes

### 4.1 Within the Home

#### 4.1.1 The Academic Climate

The parent participants modeled the importance of hard work and created a home environment emulating this. When considering her work ethic, Aishwarya said, "Since my whole family is hard working, that definitely helps". There was no question about prioritizing time; she studied first. Mrs. Sharma talked about establishing this discipline of establishing priorities. She described how even when her daughters were young, they were expected to finish their homework first. Parents in other cases described similar expectations of their children. Mr. Patel stated that "as a schoolgirl, your one responsibility is to study well".

In addition, student participants told how their parents placed them in math enrichment classes at young ages, giving them additional homework. Mr. Rao said, "I believe that if they learn concepts thoroughly, the application's easier. I thought the good background in the early days, in the maths, would help them fundamentally". Several of the parent participants described creating an academic foundation for their

children; thus they willingly spent time and money. Parents also purchased reading and math workbooks for the students to complete during the summer months. Books of all kinds were noted in each of the homes of the four cases. Students were encouraged to read and were often taken to the public library. This type of positive academic home climate, congruent with academic values set forth by schools, along with high expectations from the parents, has been shown to lead to a high levels of student achievement (Campbell & Verna, 2007).

#### 4.1.2 Parents Push—But in a Good Way

The student participants said their parents encouraged achievement and pursuit of specific careers, but there was no direct pressure placed on them. Aishwarya said, “It’s not like my parents would force me to always do this or always do that. They just say that your future is in your hands”. The majority of the student participants agreed with this sentiment. Suren and Sheela specifically talked about how their parents asked them about grades. If the grades were below an A, the parents asked how they could help. Trisha, however, called this type of involvement from her parents “emotional blackmail” whereby the expectations were set high and if not attained, she felt guilty.

Mrs. Sharma said her daughters, “know the pressure. And sometimes I feel like that is also good. It keeps their mind into that and not roaming around”. The parents talked about motivating their children through stories and explanations. Mr. and Mrs. Patel believed that since they had life experience, they should, “always try to put, not pressure, but talk them into it and then show them this is a better way of living”. The parents all concurred that this better way of living was obtained through pursuing a career in math, science, or medicine. Their experiences in India had led them to this conclusion. With the child’s interest in mind, Mrs. Sharma explained, “Again, we keep telling them the stories, the hardships we went through ... and as a natural tendency of every parent to be better than yourself, I want my kids to be better than me”. This mentality of encouragement and motivation through demonstrating values of hard work, perseverance, and discipline are congruent with the literature on parents of successful gifted children (Bloom, 1985; Feldman & Piirto, 2002; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002).

#### 4.1.3 Plan for the Future—Work Now, Relax Later

Several of the student participants described how a philosophy permeated their homes: Work hard now for future benefit. Aishwarya stated, “My mom always says, ‘If you work hard now then you can enjoy your life when you’re in your job’”. She agreed this was the best way to proceed in life. Sonya and Sheela also agreed with the concept of working now for later, but they were not happy about what that entailed for them now. Mrs. Sharma concurred that hard work was not fun. She tried to explain to her daughters, “You’ll have your time; now is not the time”. She modeled this view by exemplifying how they (Mr. & Mrs. Sharma, n.d.) did not accomplish their move to the United States through fun. Their focus had been and continues to be on educational opportunities. Mr. and Mrs. Patel told their girls that by watching television instead of working on their studies, the parents’ move to the United States to provide more opportunities for their daughters would have been for naught because the girls would end up “flipping burgers”.

## 4.2 Within Schools

### 4.2.1 The Gifted Label

The families in this study concurred that being gifted in school meant a student possessed certain knowledge ahead of his or her classmates and needed further challenge. Trisha said that being considered gifted in school was, “To be above and beyond your grade level”. While Aishwarya claimed that one could not go out and “get gifted” she did assert that through diligence and hard work, one could gain knowledge and become more intelligent. Regardless of the derivations of their giftedness, none of the students felt the need to hide their gifted label from others. There seemed to be no “social stigma” (Coleman, 2011, p. 377) for these gifted students which makes sense as academic achievement was congruent with their home and cultural environments.

When students were asked to choose an artifact to represent themselves as gifted Indian American students, the results varied. Two students (Aishwarya & Trisha) chose math certificates as their artifacts. They described their math accomplishments and Trisha commented on the pride she felt. Suren and Kareena chose artifacts related to tennis. Both of these participants explained their enjoyment of the game. Kareena added that she felt a true sense of achievement since she persevered after defeat and earned her varsity letter. Sonya chose a non-fiction book to demonstrate “all the facts that Indians know”, while Kajol chose a caricature picture of herself and her sister. Sheela said her artifact was a circle because as a gifted individual, she felt she was well-rounded. Overall, the variation of artifact selections and explanations demonstrate the diversity among gifted students and their unique personalities.

### 4.2.2 Participants’ Schools in the United States

Although this study’s intent was not to evaluate the schools or teachers, the educational context and the students’ responses within that context proved notable. Student participants attended and were observed in three different school buildings where a talent-development philosophy of advancement within a domain trajectory seemed to be prevalent (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011). For example, in middle school, Kajol and Sonya were placed in classes based on their previous demonstrated knowledge of math, not an ability score. The local high school students (Sheela and Suren) were taking advanced coursework also based on their previous achievement in domain-specific areas. Suren said he appreciated a challenging class, “because it makes me think”. Aishwarya and Trisha were on fast-paced trajectories in the magnet high school which would have them finishing high school curriculum by their second year of school. Then they were planning on taking university courses through the school’s learning centers as Kareena was doing. This type of programming led Suren to state, “I was not ever bored”. When student talked about the benefits of being in gifted programs, they appreciated being with same-ability peers. Sonya said, “They know the answer for some questions, and I know the answer for some questions, so it’s not like I know every answer compared to if I was in a normal classroom”.

#### 4.2.3 Teachers Matter

Accelerated curriculum was not all which inspired these gifted students. When asked about teachers, students described effective teachers acting as coaches. Both Sheela and Suren described working independently without direct guidance of a teacher. The teachers in some of their Advanced Placement courses were available to offer assistance but did not teach as sole provider of information.

In three of the four cases, the parents brought up the idea that schools should be trusted. Mr. Rao said, “The school’s role is very important, both in values and academics. Education is not just about reading books or something, it should be some practical application and building character”. When asked if the parents were comfortable allowing teachers of American culture to instruct their Indian children in value and character development, they resounded with the affirmative.

#### 4.3 Within Culture

##### 4.3.1 Values of the Indian Culture

According to the participants, Indian culture focuses on academics. Sheela said, “My culture definitely influences my academic path and options just because I guess there’s like a pressure of having to do well and make your parents proud”. All the students echoed similar sentiments of feeling their culture promoted academic excellence, and they strove to meet those expectations. Mrs. Sharma expressed how this belief system was part of her identity. She said, “I can’t just say, well you’re good at tennis so you can get a 3.0 GPA and focus on tennis... I just cannot do that. I cannot justify it. Maybe my brain is tuned so that education is most important for me”. Holding education in the highest of esteem was a principle ingrained and passed on to her children.

Parents in many of the cases (1, 2, & 4) stressed how important it was for them to teach their children Vedic culture and Hindu values. Mr. Yagalla said exposing his children to these values ensured that his sons “stay in touch with their roots, no matter how westernized they are”. Studies have shown how when immigrant parents emphasize the importance of integrating their homeland with mainstream culture, adolescents had higher academic achievement, self-esteem, and ethnic identity (Farver et al., 2002). Interestingly, Suren stated that his Indian culture within American mainstream culture “mix[ed] pretty well,” while other students acknowledged stark differences. None had intentions of denying their parents’ homeland culture, as they associated that culture with their own identity. Aishwarya said, “I don’t feel embarrassed, nor do I feel the need to hide who I am”. Aishwarya and her sister both wore *bindis* on their foreheads daily, unlike the other female student participants who only wore them for Indian functions.

##### 4.3.2 Challenges of Living in American Society

One of the biggest challenges for the Indian immigrant parents in this study was the unknowing. This lack of knowledge was different from the concern presented in previous studies of parents struggling to provide enough stimulation and guidance for their gifted students without over-managing them (Feldman & Piirto, 2002; Garn et al., 2012; Jolly & Matthews, 2014; Morawska & Sanders, 2009). Instead, parent participants expressed how they did not know the American school system well enough

to provide the best for their children. For example, Mrs. Rao talked about not understanding why an acceleration opportunity was offered to a friend's child and not hers.

For Mrs. Sharma, the social aspects of living in American culture were more pressing than any academic dissonance. She said they lived in a materialistic community, "Every day is a constant struggle and we kind of understand the pressure they are going through, but we can't budge into everything they ask, like brand names, top to bottom". Mrs. Sharma said she wanted her daughters to feel they fit into American culture, but she could not ignore her prudent values of saving money.

Mrs. Patel talked about children's difficulties of living in two cultures, "The kid is in a sandwich place, she's in the middle: the school, the kid is in the middle, the mom". This empathetic stance aligned with studies which found immigrant parents integrating both cultures leading to adolescents with a higher sense of ethnic identity (Farver et al., 2002). All of the student participants claimed they did not hide their culture and were proud of their ethnic heritage.

#### 4.3.3 Model Minority Stereotype

Although all of the student participants acknowledged the existence of the stereotype of Indians being smart and hard-working, most admitted they did not mind and even found it motivating. Three students mentioned the stereotype helped them to work harder because they did not want to "be the one Indian who did not fit". The students did not describe incidents when their academic performance was hindered by expectations placed on them because of stereotypes (Perry et al., 2003), but they did report negative aspects of the stereotype. Sheela said, "I'm really annoyed by that stereotype just because it's not true. It's not like I just get A's like that... I have to study the night before really hard in order to get to the top of my class". Kareena and Aishwarya agreed that the assumption was made that since they were Indian, knowledge came naturally. They talked about their peers depending on Indians in group settings to do the majority of the work. They found this part of the stereotype frustrating and resented the assumption that they would do more work.

Another component of the Indian stereotype was that Indians study to the exclusion of having a social life. Suren and Sonya both expressed distaste with this conclusion and described how they were different. They, along with the other student participants, described their involvement with numerous extra-curricular activities.

#### 4.3.4 Parents' Educational Backgrounds: Indian School System

Parent participants described a rigid educational system in India with extreme competition. Mrs. Sharma said, "You know the population is crazy in India, so education is the only thing that would get you ahead of the crowd". Competition for acceptance into universities was extremely fierce. With only an allotted number of seats available, the seats were divvied according to caste. For example, Mr. Yagalla said when he took exams, he was ranked against 55,000 students in his state, all competing for 4,000 positions in engineering universities. One parent summed it up saying, "You have to compete ... it was a survival thing". Even in high school and elementary schools, competition was an accepted component. Everyone knew each other's grades and rank because teachers regularly announced them.

According to the parents across the cases, this type of competition was very motivating for them. Several of the parents mentioned how it seemed odd that in the United States grades of all students could not be shared.

#### 4.3.5 Competition as a Part of Culture

The competition known in India transcended to the United States and was felt by the student participants. They asserted that although they sometimes felt “annoyed” by the comparisons to others, the majority felt competition motivating. Sonya said her parents made comments like, “You should be better than everyone”, and then a lecture followed about the importance of being top of her class. These discussions between parents and children seemed commonplace for the families in this study. Trisha talked about the negative aspects of competition. She said, “Well [in the Indian community], there’s a lot of competition... people always want to do better than the other, and if you lose, people look down on you ...” Aishwarya, in contrast, sought out competition. She described how she and her friend, “were very competitive. We would compare math test scores. It wasn’t hard core, it was friendly competition”. Suren agreed that competition pushes him. He claimed, “I like it when there’s competition because it makes me do better”.

#### 4.4 Self: Internal Factors

##### 4.4.1 Motivation

Parent participants admitted having high expectations of their children. When asked how they transferred those goals into motivational techniques, they said they offered assistance, created a foundation of learning, provided tutoring, and encouraged learning outside of school. These beliefs resounded studies which showed parents of gifted students providing time, money, training, monitoring, and transportation to support their children’s talent (Feldman & Piirto, 2002; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002).

The Indian parents in this study, however, did not ascribe to constant praise of accomplishments. Parents described how when students earned high grades, they were not lavishly complimented. Mrs. Sharma believed this might differ from parenting strategies in the United States. She wondered, “Maybe that keeps them [my daughters] motivated. They think, [To] earn that enthusiasm from my parents, I’ll have to do something really good”. She contended that perhaps Indian children were motivated to reach high achievement because they wanted their parents’ difficult-to-earn commendations.

Parent participants also told how they motivated their children by teaching responsibility. Mrs. Sharma explained, “It’s more than motivation. We put a lot of emphasis on the family. Their grandparents, aunts and uncles and everybody is looking at them”. This sense of thinking beyond themselves was a mentality emphasized in all of the cases. Mr. Rao talked about the importance of giving back to society and assisting those less fortunate. To instill a sense of responsibility, all of the parents talked about sharing stories of their own experiences with their children.

Several students mentioned factors beyond their grades or awards as motivational. Both Sheela and

Sonya claimed that, although they felt pressure to achieve, they felt great pride when they did well, aligning with intrinsic motivation shown in studies by Amabile (1993). Aishwarya described how envisioning the future kept her driven. She said, “Just thinking about the future, thinking about what I want to do, thinking about myself in 20 years from now, 30 years from now, that always motivates me to do better”.

Trisha commented that her biggest motivator was fear. She claimed she was worried about her punishment if she did not do well. The punishment would consist of her parents yelling and this would make her feel horrible. This sentiment seemed to relate to the literature concerning filial duty whereby children feel an obligation to succeed as a part of their family responsibility (Rao et al., 2003).

#### 4.4.2 Mindset: Intelligence is a Product of Work Ethic

Evidence of the growth mindset was apparent among parents and students in all four cases. The students defined intelligence by how much an individual knew and universally agreed that intelligence could be increased through studying, time, practice, attitude, and effort. This finding further demonstrated the findings of Rattan et al. (2012) study of Indian American college students’ perceptions on the malleability of intelligence. Aishwarya summed up participants’ perceptions as she said, “The main thing about being smart in school and being intelligent and being considered intelligent is basically your attitude about it, your work ethic, how much you actually care and want to do it”.

## 5. Discussion

The talent development models put forth by Tannenbaum (1983), Gagné (2003), Piirto (1994, 2004, 2007) and Subotnik et al. (2011) all identified talent development as the manifestation of the culmination of multiple factors. This study’s findings were no different. The perspectives of identified gifted Indian American students and their families demonstrated their beliefs on the influence of home, culture, school, and internal factors of self. The participants shared how they believed these factors, although superficially separated for discussion, intermingled and created synergy among them contributing to academic success.

### 5.1 Worlds Collide

The Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) established the interconnectedness of family members. The families in this study were all comprised of parents who emigrated from southeast India. Their culture had been infused into their belief systems—their religious values, their priorities, and their parenting. In order to leave behind one’s known society and strike out with a family in a new country, certain personality traits and values usually accompany the person. It should be of no surprise that all four families described homes which upheld virtues of work ethic, responsibility, and dedication. These virtues culminated in competitiveness and achievement, described by the students as components of their culture. The intermingling of the parents’ personalities, their homeland culture, their values, and the homes they established for their children in the United States was apparent.

As immigrants, the parents were in a situation of raising children within a mainstream culture different

from their own. Their parenting styles may have been a reflection of this unique situation. In all of the cases, the parent participants described how compromise was needed in various situations. Some parents talked about the importance of balancing the two worlds, while others talked about acclimating to the United States by understanding the mainstream culture well enough to participate in conversations. The parents compromised with their children in approved hair color; other times they purchased an item desired by their child, even though the parent did not see the need. The compromising mentality became a part of their authoritative parenting style. The students, as children of first-generation immigrants, knew the influence of their parents within their family unit. They felt the high expectations and competitiveness pushing them to succeed. Yet, because a strong sense of ethnic identity was reported, these students did not report pushing back against their culture or home environments. The students described feeling comfortable with their culture and even reported that the stereotype associated with being smart and hard-working acted as a catalyst for achievement rather than a detriment. Students believed that the American community and their homeland culture had different priorities, but the gifted Indian American students in this study found their place in the middle of these two worlds as conducive for academic success.

### *5.2 Doing What is Best for the Child*

The parents in all four cases stated they wanted their children to experience more success than they had. The parents supported their children through monitoring their work, setting high expectations, providing outside assistance, and creating an overall academic home climate. In three of the four cases, the parent participants reported growing up in families where money had been a struggle. Their parents had made great sacrifices to provide the best educational opportunities for their children. In this study, parent participants also gave their children academic experiences in hope of providing the best opportunities. In fact, opportunities were a main reason for moving to the United States. The parents valued the American educational system and appreciated its effective, caring teachers. They expressed a trust in the school system to provide challenge and acceleration for their child's talent development. Here, the importance of a collaborative relationship of school and home factors was emphasized. Teachers expected homework to be completed and resources provided while the parents looked to the teachers for guidance and educational opportunities to promote their children on their talent trajectories. Fortunately, for the students in this case, mathematic opportunities were prevalent in the three schools. Students' other talent areas might not have been as supported in the school system.

### *5.3 Indian Culture Adds Fuel to the Fire*

The Indian culture, reported by all of the participants in this study, created a sense of competition by exuding the importance of academic achievement. The parent participants described the system in India from whence they came whereby achievement was vital to have a decent standard of living. A push to the top was accepted as typical and the parents reported feeling motivated by this competition. The high prioritization of academic success came with the parents in this study as well as other immigrants making up the community. The students reported how the community pressured their parents who, in



turn, encouraged them to succeed. Competition was the main motivating force felt by the student participants, and the Indian community certainly provided that impetus. Studying was placed as a top priority in the students' lives which sometimes meant not engaging in social activities with their European American peers. This social constraint, even when based on social appropriateness, versus taking time away from studying, was also reinforced in the Indian community. In addition, since the Indian community placed high value on academic achievement, none of the students felt the need to hide their intelligence. Their cultural and school communities were congruent in their principles. It is important to note that the student and parent participants in this study lived in an area with an active Indian community in which they all participated. Without this community promoting their homeland culture and supporting academic achievement, different findings might have emerged in this study.

#### *5.4 Defining Giftedness in Different Worlds*

Students identified as gifted throughout this study only made reference to the domain which Feldhusen (1992) referred to as the academic or intellectual domain. Students identified gifted in areas of artistic, vocational-technical, or interpersonal domains (Feldhusen, 1992) were not part of this study. For the parent participants in this study, *giftedness* was a new term for them to understand in the American school system. They had not experienced this terminology nor was there a program for gifted students available to them when studying in India. Achievement had been determined purely on the ranking system. When the parent participants received notification that their children were identified gifted, they understood this to mean that their children were more advanced in their knowledge of specific content. The parents believed the schools wanted to offer a gifted education program to challenge their children so they would not become bored. This process seemed natural to them; if content were already known then the next level of content area should be provided. The parents might have agreed with Gagné's Theory of Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (1999) which states that gifts, such as intellect, could be transformed into talents through learning and practice.

The majority of the students agreed with the parents that giftedness meant that they had more knowledge. However, variations in the definition added characteristics. For example, Sonya and Kareena said that gifted students knew more than their peers but they could also pick up information quicker and understand complex topics easier. The greatest deviation in definition came from Aishwarya and Sheela who added internal traits of motivation, effort, creativity, perspective, and desire.

#### *5.5 Intelligence is Malleable*

All student and parent participants asserted that intelligence could be increased through attitude, effort, and work. Whether this philosophy stemmed from beliefs in India, or beliefs based on experience, the manifestation of this conceptualization of intelligence seemed to result in academic achievement. When difficulties arose, students sought out help, parents provided assistance, students utilized resources, and parents shared personal experiences of inspiration. Again this confluence of home, school, and culture with their underlying components of self, seemed to propel the students toward academic success.

## 6. Implications

### 6.1 Education

Just as the *Marland report* (1972), the *Javits gifted and talented students education act* (1988), and the *National Excellence: A case for developing America's talent* (1993) all recommended, schools need to nurture students who demonstrate high achievement. These students need to have different or accelerated curricula in which they can be challenged and supported in their development. By providing accelerated courses for students who dedicate time and effort within a domain, an environment of synergy can be established. Students need to be in classes with same-ability peers for collaborative group work and an inquiry-based environment. This type of learning environment was observed in several of the student participants' classrooms. When the students in this study described their accelerated courses, they claimed that they were "never bored" and enjoyed the challenge. In addition, student participants believed that being in same-ability classrooms was more conducive to their learning since the amount of questioning was spread out among the students and group work was more effective.

### 6.2 Teaching Growth Mindset

The students in this study received messages from home that through hard work and perseverance, they could increase their intelligence. They were taught through personal examples and instruction how to persevere through difficulties. When students do not receive this message, they sometimes believe they lack innate intelligence. This misconception has been shown to decrease motivation and risk taking (Blackwell et al., 2007). Teaching the malleability of intelligence is an important concept which could inspire students and teachers. By presenting teachers and students with brain research on the malleability of intelligence, students' motivation and achievement could be enhanced.

Similarly, the concept of competitions being utilized as a tool for growth and development should be embraced by schools. While not all students flourish in competitive realms, those who self-select to compete have been shown to improve in many areas, such as domain-specific interests, real-world application of knowledge, and networking with mentors. Certainly, the majority of the student participants in this study, along with their parents, felt motivated by competition.

## 7. Limitations

These families were selected because they met the specified criteria. Their relationship with me was relied upon to establish rapport and trustworthiness. This goal was met, however, the representative cases provided a very narrow view of southeast Indian immigrants living in a Midwestern location which had an active Indian community. This study might provide rich contextual data of immigrants coming from southeastern India, but different themes might emerge if studies included participants who emigrated from a wider variety of states in India. In addition, variation in family demographics turned out to be lacking. Coincidentally, all of the families have two children, both identified as gifted. None of the families had only one child. It is difficult to determine how the family dynamics would change

the lived experience of these gifted students.

## 8. Future Studies

Future studies revolving around diverse family dynamics of Indian families such as variation in number of children, gender, and difference of ability among siblings could provide additional insight into the experiences of gifted students and their immigrant Indian parents. In addition, variance in location both from whence the parents emigrated and where the students and their families reside would provide a broader understanding of culture and home environments.

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