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Academic, Social and Emotional Perceptions of Gifted and Talented Students in the Elementary Setting

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Academic, Social and Emotional Perceptions of Gifted and Talented Students in the Elementary

Setting

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Abstract

Research has been done comparing academic achievement of gifted students in diverse school environments, but little has been found about their perceptions as learners in these environments. The purpose of this action research study was to gain academic, social and emotional perceptions of six gifted and talented students in a self-contained elementary classroom. The author collected data through a perception survey, student and teacher interviews, and teacher observations. After collecting data for four weeks and analyzing it using the constant comparative method, the author found that the GT students were challenged in math, extracurricular activities were their favorite, they displayed positive peer interactions, and their perceptions of failure varied. This study will give insight to other educators about the perceptions of GT students in the elementary school setting.

Academic, Social and Emotional Perceptions of Gifted and Talented Students in an Elementary Setting

The answer to my curiosity to know what a GT (gifted and talented) students' perception of school was came in a simple sentence which was said by Paige (all names are pseudonyms), a GT student who participated in my study. She said, "...challenging stuff is easy...but, easy stuff in first grade is challenging to me." This quote captured the overall perception of the gifted and talented students in my class, and I used this thought to further explore what challenge meant to these students and where they found challenge in the school setting. Educators and researchers have focused on the performance of gifted and talented students, but I sought to investigate their academic, social and emotional perceptions of school, how their perceptions differed between male and female gifted learners, and how their perceptions impacted their learning.

Purpose

The purpose of my study was to investigate the academic, social and emotional perceptions of gifted and talented students about school, and whether or not they feel challenged in school. I wanted to investigate how GT students perceive the learning environment, and how they see themselves and their peers (gifted and non-gifted) fitting into the school environment.

My research questions for the study were as follows:

What are the social, emotional and academic perceptions of a GT student concerning the learning environment?

- In what ways do GT boys and girls in my class perceive school differently?
- What is the perception of the GT teacher, my cooperating teacher, of the GT students and their overall performance in school?

- What are my perceptions of the GT students as I observe their academic, social and emotional influences?

While I conducted this study, I was a graduate student completing a year-long clinical teaching placement at Tucker Elementary in a second grade classroom. Tucker Elementary was a Title 1 school part of Adams Independent School District serving approximately 550 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, almost 75% of whom were coded as economically disadvantaged.

Related Literature

Research shows that some GT students have the social perception of either being an “insider” or “outsider” when it comes to their social life at school, and some try to cover up their gifted identity by using negative coping strategies such as displaying negative behavior in order not to receive an “outsider” status (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012). Furthermore, there are also gender expectations that gifted learners have given themselves as described by Eddles-Hirsh et al. (2012). Males tend to want the athletic label over the academic label because athleticism is perceived as a masculine identity by most male peers, whereas females usually care about their academic identity and like to be perceived as a gifted learner.

These findings coincide with Berlin’s (2009) study on the stereotypes that are placed on gifted students. Berlin (2009) concluded that the negative stereotypes of gifted students usually come from classmates or others who do not know the students personally. In the same study, she found that gifted students actually had more positive perceptions of themselves linked to self-confidence, and that they valued greater academic opportunities and challenges. Others argue that gifted students who are not performing to their potential are not underachieving, as some will call it, but rather they are under-challenged (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2012). The balance

between self-confidence and the appropriate learning challenge is key in motivating gifted learners and cultivating positive perceptions of themselves.

A cluster grouping study conducted by Brulles, Saunders and Cohn (2010) revealed that GT students who were put in a cluster class with students who have similar academic abilities and a GT trained teacher perform at higher academic levels than GT students who are mainstreamed into general education classrooms. The researchers concluded that the students performed higher due to the level of differentiation since gifted learners were the teacher's main focus. Clustering students by ability slightly narrows the learning gap within the classroom and allows for more flexible and effective instruction as the researchers found.

A similar cluster model study done by Eddles-Hirsh et al. (2012) revealed how GT students navigated two school environments. In one environment, the students were grouped into GT clusters, researchers noticed that the students in the cluster classroom perceived the learning environment as label-free and felt safe to learn without a stigma. Likewise, in a study conducted by Vidergor and Gordon (2015), researchers found that self-contained classrooms of gifted students do cater to their needs according to the students, teachers, and parents interviewed in the study. However, others have perceived this ability grouping to be detrimental because students begin to compete with one another (Eddles-Hirsh et al., 2012). In the second environment, the students were randomly placed in classrooms with a variety of student abilities. When the students were asked how they felt about being placed with a mixed-ability group of peers, answers varied. Some gifted students said they liked the heterogeneous classroom because they missed interacting with their non-gifted friends when they were in the GT class. However, others said they felt pressure to fit in because they were perceived as the "smart kid" by their peers,

putting pressure on the students to hide their academic label in exchange for more equal social interactions with peers.

In their book, Berliner and Glass (2014) identified some myths about “tracking” or grouping students into classrooms according to ability. They found that low-achieving students suffer from this type of grouping while high-achieving students showed no profound academic or social gain. This difference was due to the fact that many of the students in the gifted programs were being “tracked” on more than just ability, but on race and socioeconomic status as well. Berliner and Glass (2014) concluded that grouping students by ability level robs them of interacting and learning from peers with diverse backgrounds.

Differentiation is defined as the match of curriculum to a learner’s needs based on their cognitive level and experiences (Roberts & Inman, 2015). Roberts and Inman (2015) explain that each student should be on a journey of continuous academic progress according to his or her needs. Furthermore, in a study done by Piske et al. (2017), the researchers suggest that allowing gifted students the opportunity to create and have an innovative mindset can transform their perceptions of school when it may seem redundant to learn content they have already mastered. De Corte (2013) also emphasized in his research that learning is constructive and self-regulated. In other words, students have to manage and monitor their learning in order for differentiation to be productive. A study by Swan et al. (2015) investigated the perceptions of gifted students in a virtual learning environment that challenged constructive learning. The researchers indicated the students enjoyed the challenge that came with learning in a self-paced and choice-driven environment. The students appreciated having some control of the learning objectives and working in an independent environment with gifted peers.

Young and Balli (2014) found that gifted students and their parents perceived that differentiated instruction is needed in order to achieve at a higher level than their non-gifted peers. In this study, a common perception of gifted students' parents was that they should be stretched even further in their academic and creative abilities. In addition, gifted students believed they should have classes specifically geared toward their needs so that instruction was not redundant. Differentiated instruction is continually supported by researchers, students, parents, and teachers as a way to stretch the learning of gifted students to maintain their continuous progress (Roberts & Inman, 2015).

As I read through the research on gifted students it was evident that gifted student perceptions have yet to be fully explored in educational research. In some ways this type of data is the most important because it tells us how students feel about learning and gives teachers an idea of how they will perform academically. After researching the gifted population, I concluded there has been some research done about the academic and emotional perceptions of gifted students, but there is not much research concerning how the students perceive themselves socially with both their gifted and non-gifted peers. My study contributes social perceptions of gifted students, how they navigate friendships with their gifted and non-gifted peers, and possibly how this influences them as learners. I also investigated GT students' perception of how they fit into the classroom environment with peers who have a variety of academic, social and emotional backgrounds and experiences.

What I Did

This action research study was conducted in a self-contained second grade classroom. I studied the academic, social, and emotional perceptions of the students who had been identified as gifted and talented in my class. Throughout the study, the students were comfortable with me

as teacher and researcher because of the strong relationships I had established with them throughout the process of my year-long clinical teaching placement.

Participant Selection

My classroom used the GT clustering model which means that all the students who had been identified as gifted and talented in the second grade were “clustered” or placed in the same classroom with a GT trained teacher to receive differentiated instruction at their level (Brulles et al., 2010). Therefore, the participants of this study were the six of 17 students in my class who had been identified as gifted and talented. There were four girls and two boys including three white females, one African female, one white male, and one African American male. My cooperating teacher was also part of the study as she participated in an interview about her perceptions of GT students to add depth to the research; she is a white female. I received the proper assent and consent from all the participants to conduct the research.

Data Collection

I decided to collect three forms of data in order to gain a more detailed perspective of the participants’ perceptions. The data included student perception surveys, student and teacher interviews, and my observations of the students. The six GT students took a perception survey that included a mix of Likert scale responses ranging from 1-4 (1 being the students feel completely negatively about the topic and 4 being the students feel the most positive about the topic) and some open-ended questions pertaining to their academic, social and emotional perceptions of school (see Appendix A for the full survey).

I interviewed all six GT students in my class because I was interested to know their unique perspectives as they all have different backgrounds. I followed a semi-structured interview protocol where I asked the students some preplanned questions concerning their

perceptions of school, but I was open to asking other questions as I listened to their responses and was interested to learn more (Hendricks, 2017). I asked questions such as the following: “How do you feel when you are at school? In what ways, if any, are you challenged at school? What is one thing you would change about school if you could?” (see Appendix B for the full interview protocol). Each student interview was about 10 to 15 minutes in length depending on the responses of the students. I also conducted a 15-20 minute teacher interview with my cooperating teacher which also followed the semi-structured interview protocol described above. The interviews took place the second and third week of the study.

The last method of data collection was my own informal teacher observations and journaling. I observed the GT students throughout the study in academic and social contexts such as the classroom, playground, and extracurricular activities including art, music and P.E. I took informal notes in a journal throughout the study and later fleshed them out to headnotes to provide more information. I analyzed their observable perceptions of school and my thoughts on their language, behavior and actions throughout the school day in a variety of contexts and situations. I conducted informal observations at least once a week to observe how their perceptions, and my own, changed throughout the study.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data collected by using the constant comparative method. In this method of analysis, the researcher looks for common themes in the data and organizes them into categories or parent codes, and then further analyzes the data by creating subcategories or child codes (Hubbard & Power, 2003). The parent codes are also known as level I codes, and the child codes can also be called level II codes. First, I analyzed the first twenty percent of my data and created about 20 codes to represent my initial findings; these became my level I codes. Then, I analyzed

the level I codes to create a hierarchy of level II supporting codes based on the major themes I found in my data. Last, I selected three level II codes to write memos that summarized my overall findings. I created a codebook as a legend for my data to organize my findings and to help others interpret the data (Tracy, 2013, see Appendix C for codebook).

What I Found

Based on the data I collected and analyzed, the four major themes I found were the following: the students were not challenged to their maximum potential (except for in math), extracurricular activities were a favorite, they had positive peer interactions, and their positive and negative perceptions of failure. These four themes describe the academic, social and emotional perceptions of the GT students, GT teacher and my own.

Not Challenged to Maximum Potential...Except for Math

This theme is focused around the GT students' academic perception of school. As I observed the students in the classroom, I noticed they were not being challenged to their maximum potential because they were frequently the first to finish assignments, and they would receive almost perfect scores each time. I could tell they craved more deep and reflective thinking as they asked thoughtful questions during instruction. However, there were also those who zoned out during instruction because they simply found it hard to stay focused on content they had already mastered. These were just observations I made as a teacher researcher; however, after surveying and interviewing all six GT students in my class I found many of these observations to be a reality for the students. Figure 1 shows the survey percentage results on a scale of 1-4 of students who were excited about coming to school each day (to see full survey questions see Appendix D).

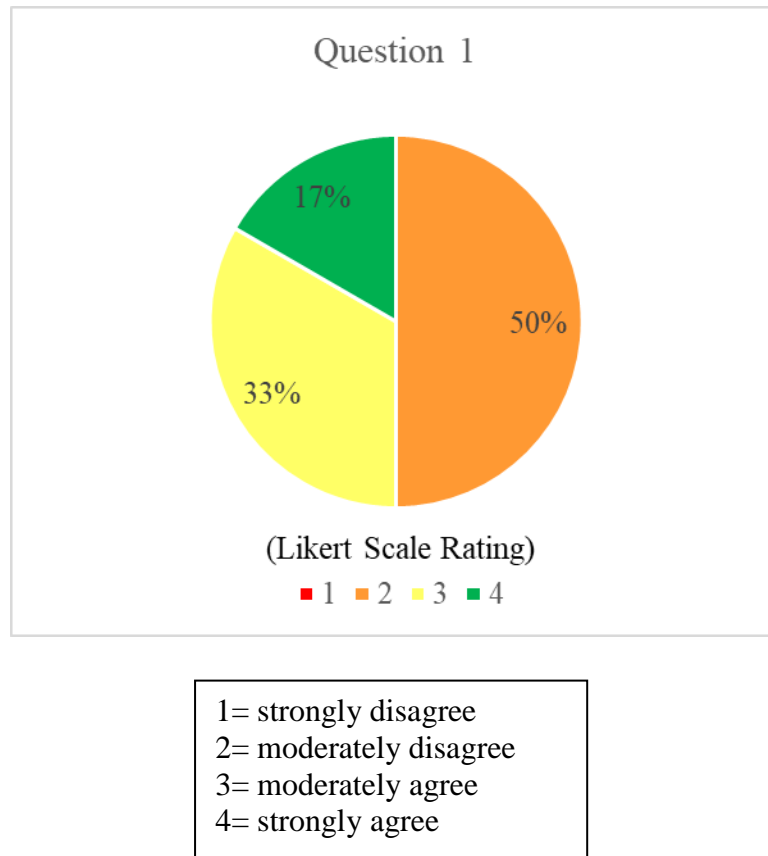


Figure 1. Students' perception of coming to school every day.

In my interviews, I started out by asking the students how they felt about coming to school each day. I received mixed responses to this question, and I noticed half of the students felt excited about coming to school and half had more negative feelings about this question. Felix, Amber and Paige said they felt excited about coming to school, but Anne, Jeff and Susan had moderate to negative feelings about coming to school. Susan summed up their perceptions when she said the following during her interview, "...coming to school makes me want to go home." The students also indicated in the survey's open-ended responses both being excited to come to school and not being excited for school. Figures 2-4 display some of the students' short answer responses.

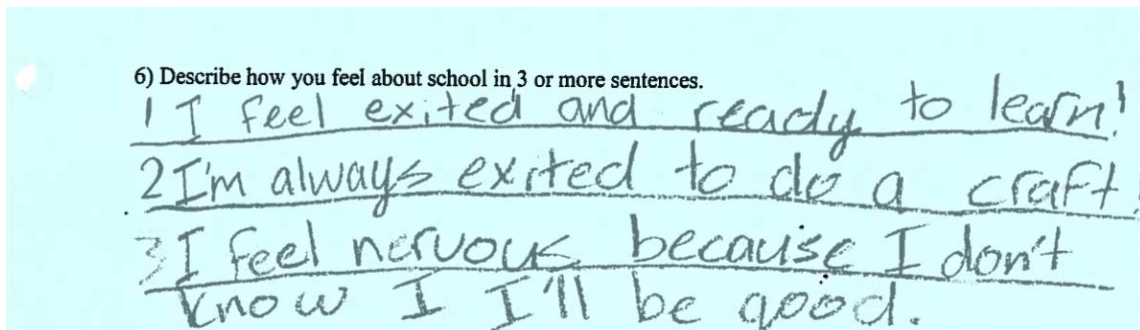


Figure 2. Amber's survey response.

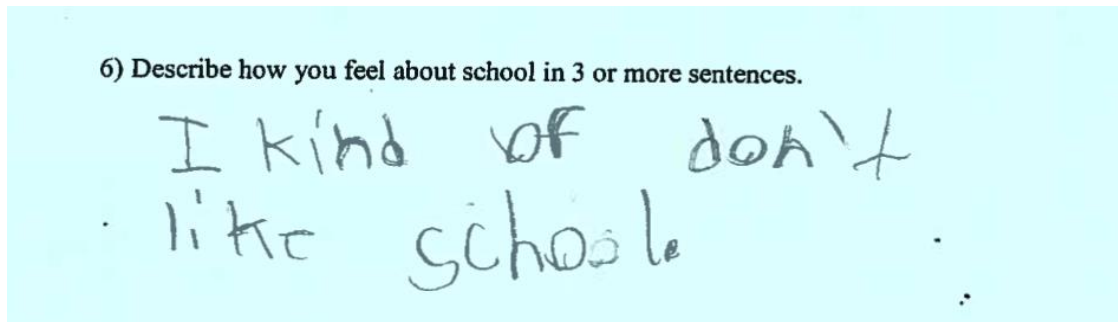


Figure 3. Jeff's survey response.

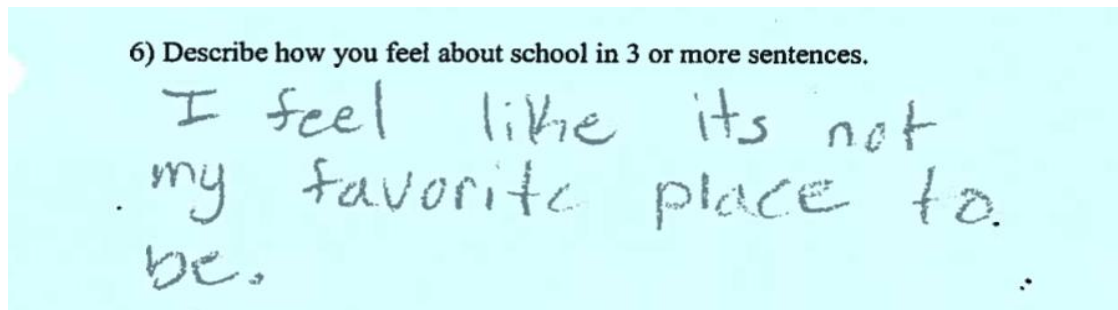


Figure 4. Anne's survey response.

After analyzing the data I noticed that the reason for their lack of excitement was due to not being challenged to their maximum potential. The students felt under-challenged in most academic subjects except for math. All the participants said they felt challenged in math, particularly in division, multiplication, and regrouping in subtraction. Figure 5 shows the results of the students' perceptions of feeling challenged in school.

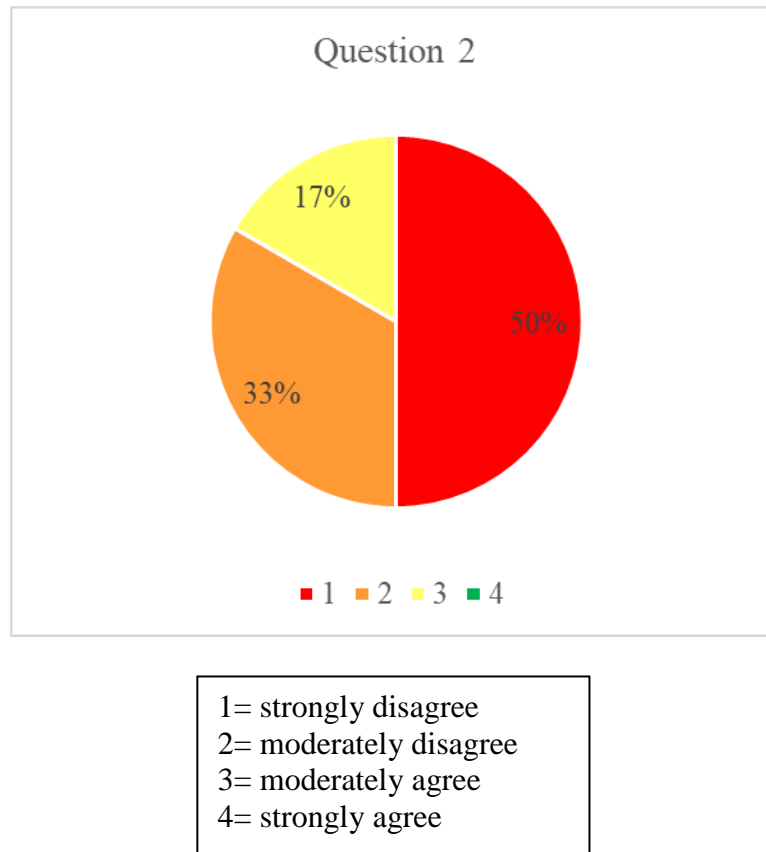


Figure 5. Students' perception of feeling challenged in school.

As one can observe after analyzing Figure 5, half of the students rated being challenged in school a 1, which was the lowest rating. Two of the students rated it a 2, which indicated they moderately disagreed with the statement, and only one student, Susan, rated this question a 3 indicating she felt reasonably challenged in school (after analyzing her interview I learned that she had a negative perception of failing tests which could be tied to her feeling challenged in school). Susan said she felt challenged in division and stated, "...sometimes I think it's hard and sometimes I think it's easy." The uncertainty of performing well caused Susan to feel challenged in math. Likewise, in her survey, she said she also felt challenged in tests (see Figure 6).

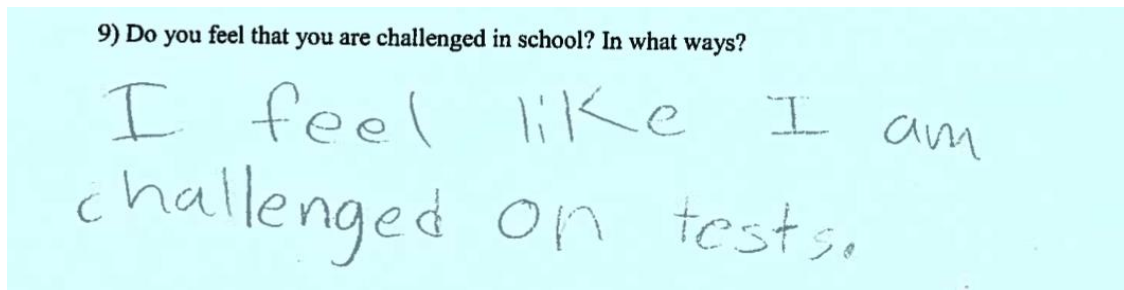


Figure 6. Susan's survey response.

Jeff's perception of math being challenging was tied to failure when he said, "...the division cause on one of the things I, um, was doing it and I got it wrong..." For Jeff, being exposed to possible failure was what qualified a subject as challenging. When asked if he felt challenged, Jeff stated in his survey that he wanted to be better at math, meaning he recognized that math was an area he could grow in due to it being challenging (see Figure 7). Jeff was also the only student that seemed uninterested during math instruction, yet he said he was challenged in math and wanted to improve in it. This also came up during his interview when he said he liked doing the basic facts in math "...because it's not that hard," but he also mentioned he wanted math to be harder or more challenging. I was confused by his response and asked if he truly wanted to be challenged in math or not. He was unsure of what to reply, and I prompted him by saying, "Does it go back and forth," to which he nodded his head in agreement.

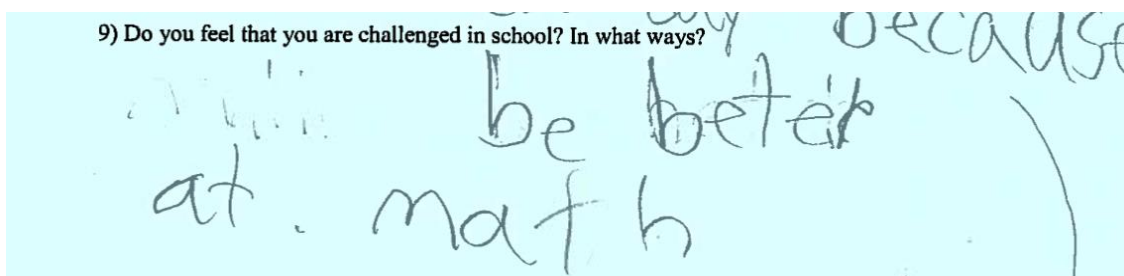


Figure 7. Jeff's survey response.

In his interview, Felix said he would like to be stretched in math, "By doing division and subtraction with regrouping and multiplication problems only." These are the topics in math that

challenge him the most, so he wanted to engage in them more often. Anne said, "...even just the tiny problems make my brain think really hard cause I'm trying to learn do to it without my hand..." Anne makes math challenging for herself by practicing doing mental math even with simple word problems. Anne supported her response about creating challenge for herself in her survey when she said she wanted to be stretched or challenged with "mind-working work" (see Figure 8).

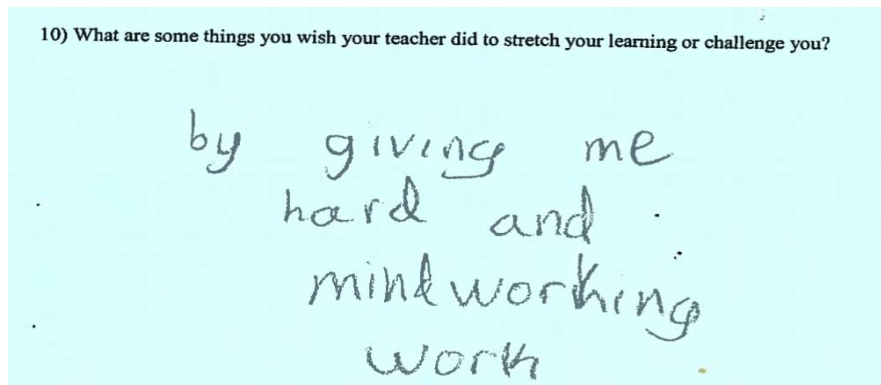


Figure 8. Anne's survey response.

Paige answered my question about how GT students perceive challenge. She stated, "...challenging stuff is easy...but, easy stuff in first grade is challenging to me." She synthesized that challenging material is easy for her because she has motivation to complete it since she enjoys doing it, but easy tasks are challenging because she has no motivation to complete them. I thought this finding was brilliant and answered my question about the academic perception of GT students. Paige's survey responses on questions 9 and 10 (see Appendix A for full survey questions) also indicated she was challenged in math, but that she wanted more of a challenge in general (see Figure 9).

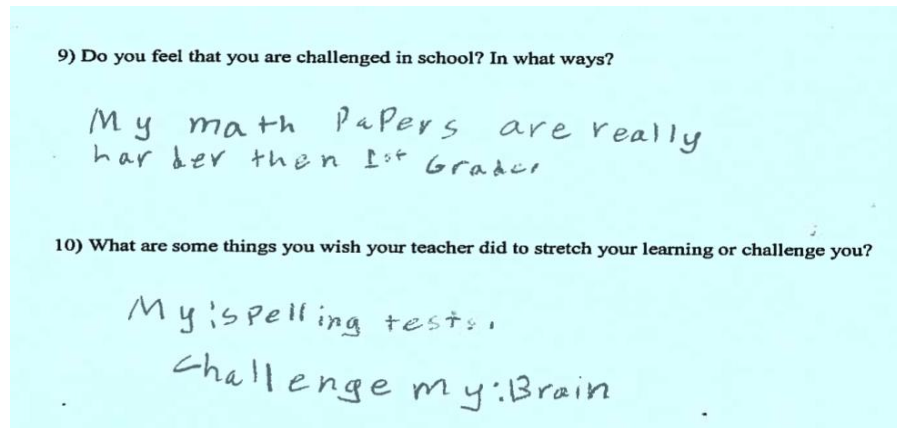


Figure 9. Paige's survey response.

Miss G also considered the students to be challenged in math as she noticed that simple math problems would sometimes "...throw them." She said that because the school year was coming to an end it puzzled her that simple word problems were becoming hard for them, and her explanation for this was because they overthink the math problems. Another challenge these students experienced from the perspective of the GT teacher was their ability to communicate with their peers and adults, and to deal with their emotions. She observed that they were challenged in the way they interacted with their peers and how they expressed their own feelings. She said, "Like intellectually they're very high, but emotionally they're not." Yes, they were not challenged to their maximum potential in the academic realm, but they seemed to have hidden social and emotional challenges as will be explored in later themes.

My perception of the GT students as I observed them during math instruction was that it was challenging for them because math problems can be solved from different perspectives. I observed this first hand during my informal observation of them the third week of the study. The math topic for the week was goods and services, and the students were completing a worksheet that asked them to identify if the jobs listed produced a good or a service. In my mind this activity was pretty simple and self-explanatory, but it ended up raising good discussion among

the students. One discussion we had was whether a construction worker produced a good or a service. The students made the argument that a construction worker does provide a service by building houses and other buildings. However, Anne brought up the fact that they do produce a good, which is the building they construct. The students saw both perspectives of this scenario and were able to justify each side, which got them thinking deeper. This concept challenged all of the students in our class, they learned math topics can be looked at from multiple perspectives just like reading topics. The data supported that math stretches the GT students' learning beyond right or wrong answers, by considering the different processes to use to come to a solution.

Extracurricular Activities are a Favorite

After conducting surveys, interviews, and observations, I found that the number one motivator for the GT students in my class was extracurricular activities. Every student talked about recess, P.E., music, and/or art being one of their favorite subjects because they were fun, creative thinking was prompted, and they usually involved a social aspect. I started the interview process by administering a drawing activity to each student. I started by drawing a single squiggly line on a blank piece of paper, and I told them to draw a picture using that squiggly line as the starting point. Every student was excited to complete this activity, and I was amazed at the creativity they displayed in their drawings. Some examples of objects they drew included a dog, boot, waterfall, and a person's face. This activity in itself spoke about the students' creativity and excitement for artistic activities even before they answered the interview questions.

In their interviews, the students named many reasons why extracurricular activities were their favorite activities, and friends were one of those reasons. For example, Jeff stated, "I like playing football and all kinds of sports (at recess)." Then he proceeded to say he liked recess and

sports because "...my friends are there." In his survey, Jeff included that he wanted recess to be extended to the morning and afternoon because he wanted to play more (see Figure 10).

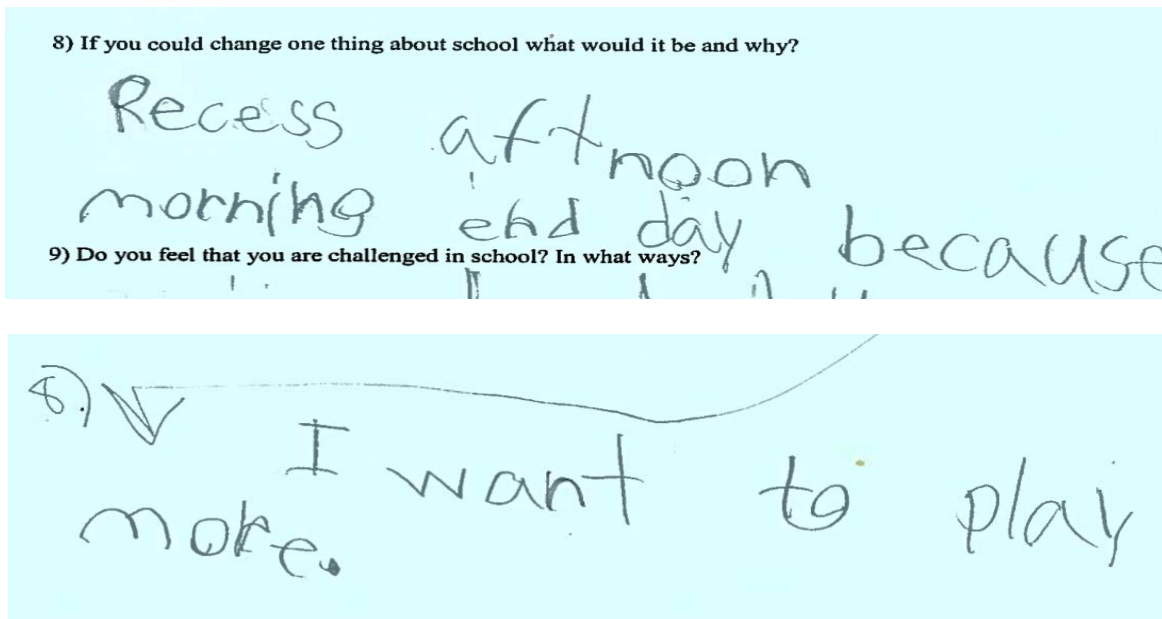


Figure 10. Jeff's survey response.

Felix said that his favorite subject was art because he got to use a "free draw idea box" to store ideas that he wanted to draw later in life. This told me that he enjoyed art because he got to think creatively using his idea box, and he got to practice drawing those ideas. He mentioned that he liked to draw superheroes in art class because they made him feel excited. Art prompts creativity and excitement in Felix. Figure 11 shows Felix's responses to how he feels about school and what his favorite thing about school is; both responses involve extracurricular activities.

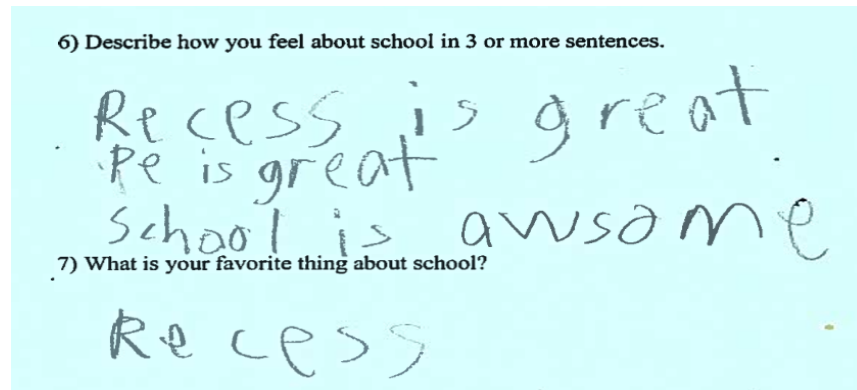


Figure 11. Felix's survey response.

Paige said something that was profound and summed up many of the feelings the GT students expressed. In reference to singing in music class she said, "...what we do is...kind of like who we are." Paige talked about music, art and P.E. classes emphasizing their personalities and their strengths. She said she learned new things from extracurricular activities because they challenged her to think in a different way than reading or math does. Susan's comment tied closely to Paige's when she claimed, "...my life is art and music. I'm really good at art and music." This was a common theme among the students; they all mentioned extracurricular activities being their favorite because they are fun, and they get to express their true personalities. I also found that creative thinking in extracurricular activities prompted challenge for them because they were thinking out of the box, or different than in academic subjects. Extracurricular activities also challenged them because there was no right or wrong way to engage in these activities; hence, they got to be creative in how they performed them. Art, music, P.E. and recess gave the GT students an opportunity to creatively express themselves.

When asked in the survey what her favorite thing about school was, Amber responded with a wide range of subjects, but extracurricular activities such as art and recess were definitely included in the mix (see Figure 12). In her interview she also mentioned she liked art and recess because, "...sometimes they can be fun," and "...because sometimes you get to learn things with

them.” Amber supported her like of extracurricular activities by saying they are fun, and that she gets to learn from them as well.

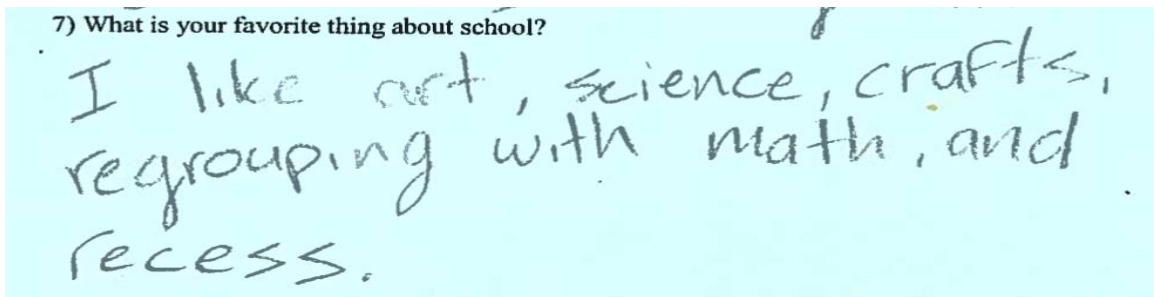


Figure 12. Amber’s survey response.

A subtheme I found in the data that tied closely to extracurricular activities was that being gifted is multi-faceted. The students and GT teacher concluded that being gifted is multi-faceted and that it goes beyond academics. When I asked Anne if she believed that being gifted only pertained to school work she replied, “No, I think it’s like all around, everywhere.” Then, when I asked her what other areas a person could be gifted in she said, “...sports and drawing and music and stuff like that.” Anne was convinced that being gifted encompassed academic and extracurricular subjects because they could both prompt challenge and enjoyment. Miss G said, “...there’s so many levels of GT” when she discussed that our students are gifted in academics and the arts.

When I asked the students what subject they believed they were most gifted in they replied with an extracurricular subject. Anne said she believed she was most gifted in art and sports. Felix said, “Art because I get to draw and paint.” Paige said she was gifted in music, art and P.E. Amber decided she was most gifted in Jujutsu, which is a form of martial arts. She said she enjoyed Jujutsu because it was a physical activity just like she enjoyed gymnastics and swimming because they allowed her to be physically active. The students understood that being

gifted covers a broader spectrum than just academic subjects, and they recognized they are gifted in extracurricular subjects.

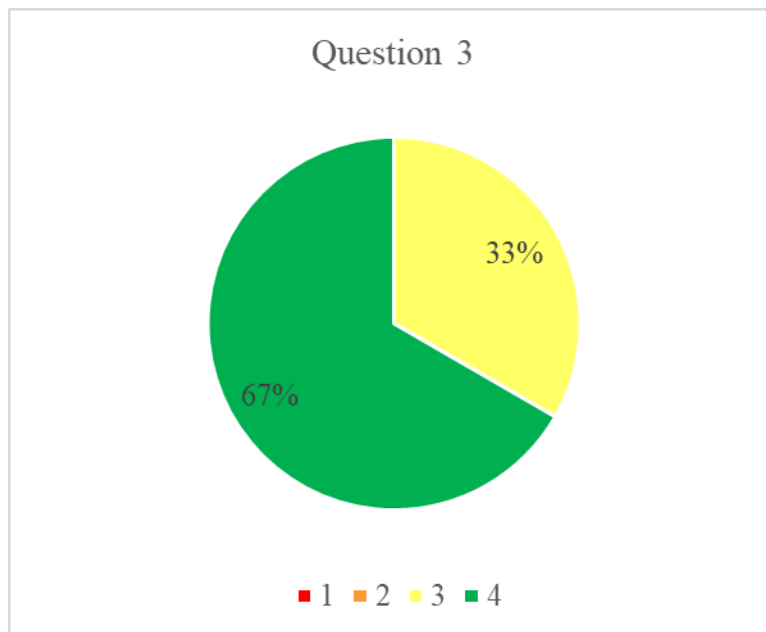
My perception of the GT students and extracurricular activities is that these subjects were their strength. I believe that my students are gifted academically, but, like them, I also believe they are more gifted in extracurricular subjects. I noticed this when I observed them in art, music, P.E. and recess. They seemed to be at their maximum level of engagement when participating in these activities. I saw them be creative in their artistic choices in art, how they sang in ostinato during music, and how they creatively played with their friends at P.E. and recess. Extracurricular activities are an authentic way to stretch their learning because no grades are tied to their performance, rather these activities are an expression of who they are. Extracurricular activities were the students' favorite subjects because they made them think in a creative way that stretched their brain in a distinct manner that academic subjects did not. I found that extracurricular activities prompted creative thinking, which induced challenge for them, and, in turn, gave them motivation to learn.

Positive Peer Interactions

The third theme I found in the data targeted the social perception of the GT students, which indicated they have an overall positive perception of their gifted and non-gifted peers. Most of the students mentioned that their friends were a primary reason they were excited to come to school each day. They said their peers made school fun, they encouraged them, and they helped each other in personal and academic areas. When I asked Anne how her peers affected her feelings about school she said, "...they make it seem a lot more fun because like they're there, and they like help me..." She also mentioned they encourage her, and she encouraged them as well. Felix, when asked how he felt about his friends, replied, "They're nice to me and

I'm nice to them back.” Another thing Felix, Susan, and Amber mentioned in their interviews was that they introduced themselves to their peers at the beginning of the school year, and this action made their friendships flourish in a positive manner.

In the survey, I asked the students to rate on a scale from 1-4 if they had similar and different friends than them (see Figure 13). This is something I had observed even before I conducted the study. As I further observed the students in and out of the classroom setting, I found positive student interactions to be a reoccurring theme because the students frequently helped each other in academic and extracurricular subjects, and they seemed to enjoy each other's company. I also noticed there was no noticeable barrier between the GT students and their non-gifted peers. In fact, Felix and Jeff preferred to play with their non-gifted classmates during P.E. and recess because they had more common interests with them as I observed during my informal observations in these settings. I also noticed they have friends (non-gifted) in the other second grade classes who they enjoy playing with at P.E. and recess.



1= strongly disagree 2= moderately disagree 3= moderately agree 4= strongly agree

Figure 13. Survey result of students indicating they have similar and different friends than them.

Another finding I thought was interesting was that the GT students noticed no difference between GT girls and boys. When I asked Amber this question she said, “I think they are all gifted.” I also asked Paige this question and she replied, “We’re all really the same because we’re in GT.” She also discussed something else concerning this topic that caught my attention, she said, “...if you’re you, you’re you. You don’t have to be a girl or a boy.” When I asked Miss G if she noticed a difference between GT girls and boys she replied, “...I don’t know. I guess I haven’t really.” These statements provided by the students and the GT teacher during their interviews support the finding that they noticed no difference between female and male gifted students.

The last code I found to support that GT students have positive peer interactions was that they believed all their peers were gifted. Anne said her non-gifted peers just think differently than the GT students. In addition, she stated, “I feel like they should be counted as gifted and talented too.” She also mentioned feeling sad for others who are “gifted,” but are not labeled as gifted. This demonstrated her ability to empathize with her peers and her desire to see them succeed. Amber simply replied to the question of whether everyone is gifted with, “I think they’re gifted.” Miss G had a great deal to say on this matter as she made the claim that, “...everyone has gifts.” Later in her interview she said there are “...kids who are gifted...like, academically,” and “other kids are gifted socially.” She, like the students, believed everyone has gifts, and that these gifts can be expressed in academic, social and/or emotional ways.

At first, it caught me by surprise that the students thought all their peers were gifted because I knew that not everyone in that class had been labeled as gifted and talented. However, once the students started to talk about their peers being on the same “gifted” level as their own, my perception shifted. Of course, I knew that everyone has gifts and strengths that make them unique, but I had a preconceived idea about gifted students being on a different intellectual level that only their brains were capable of. However, after listening to my participants talk about giftedness and as I observed the GT students in diverse settings as they interacted with their peers, I more deeply believed everyone is gifted in some way. Yes, not every student will be labeled as gifted and talented in their school career because they might not be “gifted” according to the school’s standards, but every student should be taught as if they are gifted, whether that be academically, socially or emotionally.

Perceptions of Failure

The last major theme I found in the data was tied to an emotional perception of the GT students revolving around failure. The students mentioned feeling sad, mad, and/or nervous when discussing situations of failure in their interviews and surveys. Figure 14 below shows the percentage of students who said they felt sad or stressed when failing an assignment or task.

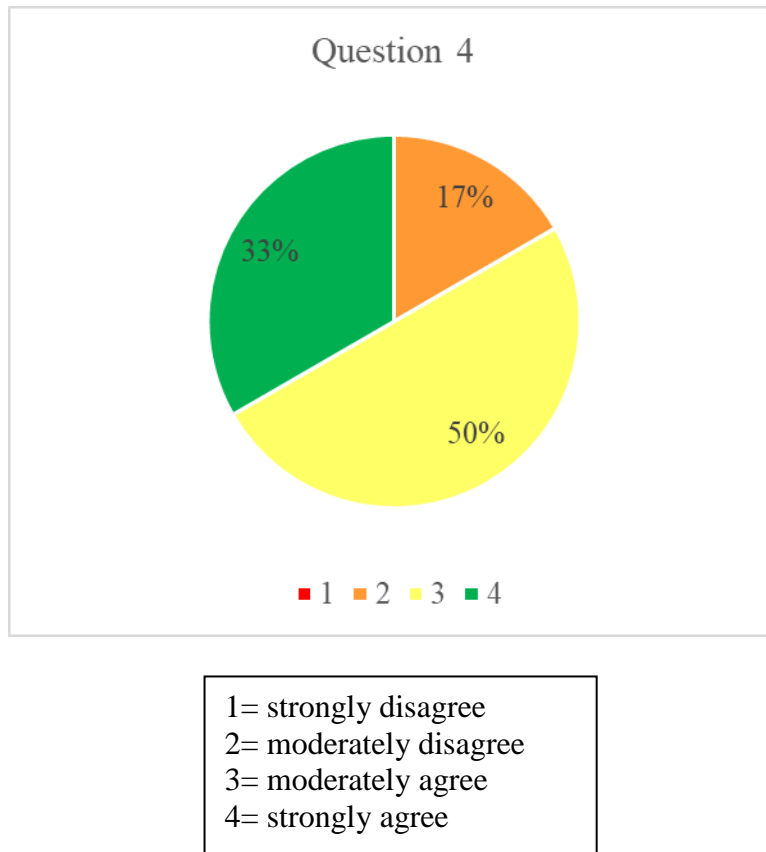


Figure 14. Percentage of students who felt sad or stressed when failing a task.

About half of the six GT students had a growth mindset when dealing with failure as evidenced in their survey and interview responses. Anne communicated this feeling very well when she said, "...if you make mistakes you can learn from them." She also said she felt a little sad when failing, but that she was confident she tried her best. Amber said she felt bad when failing, but when I asked her how she dealt with failure she said she tried again. This statement communicated she was determined not to dwell in failure, but to grow from her mistakes. Paige also displayed a growth mindset about failing when she talked about failing the GT test in kindergarten but passing it in first grade. She said, "...in first grade I knew a little bit more and I kept on bringing that in, and, so, I've learned a lot." Paige was determined to pass the GT test, and she used her past mistakes and current knowledge to achieve that goal.

The other half of the students talked about failure making them sad and/or angry because they did not meet their standard of success. Felix said, "...I usually throw a fit when I get home" in order to deal with failure. Jeff's perception of failure was tied to consequences he received at home and at school. He said he did not get to play with his iPad at home if he failed, and he talked about running a lap at recess when he had to move his clip down at school. Jeff not only believed failure was tied to grades, but also with displaying negative behavior at school. The statement that summarized Jeff's perception of failure was, "I just don't feel smart."

Susan had negative feelings about failing tied to tests, particularly the third grade standardized tests she would be taking the next year (see Figure 15). This was a fear she brought up in her survey and interview and both instances were tied to worry about failing the tests. She said it makes her feel sad when she's really good at something and then she fails it. "Like it makes me feel nervous...that I failed it."

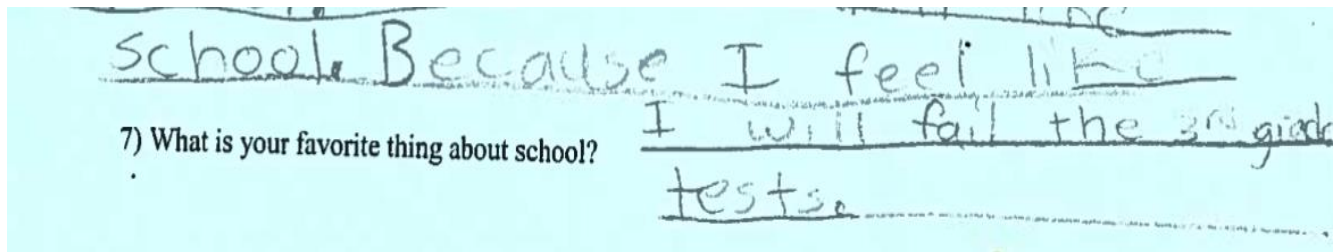


Figure 15. Susan's survey response.

A subtheme I found tied to failure was that the GT students' standard for passing was scoring 100%. Many students talked about "failing" being equivalent to missing one question on an activity or test, or simply not scoring a 100%. When I asked Amber how she felt about grades she said she felt nervous and continued by saying, "Usually sometimes I get lower than 100." I asked her if 100 was her goal, and she said yes. Paige discussed the pre-spelling test with me during her interview, and she was concerned that she did not score a 100 since Miss G did not call her name at the end of the test. I asked her if she thought she failed since she did not make a

100, and she replied with, “Yeah.” I asked Paige how she felt when scoring a B on an assignment, and she replied, “Actually...I don’t think I’ve gotten a B before.” This statement suggested she was focused on perfection, and any score apart from a 100% was considered failure to her. My cooperating teacher said it well, “I don’t think 70 is a thought for them.” However, she also stated that it was good for them to experience some failure “...because it lets them see you’re human.” The GT students displayed positive and negative perceptions of failure according to their emotional motivation and their past experiences.

My perception of the students and failure is that for some of them it challenged and motivated them (for example, in math), and for some it shut them down. I noticed they were more reluctant to fail in academic subjects because, as Amber said, “...those are the ones that get grades.” They feared failing assignments and tests that were tied to a grade, and unfortunately there was ample room to fail according to their passing standard of 100%. On the other hand, I also noticed they were comfortable with making mistakes in extracurricular activities because they seemed to accept their “failure” with no hard feelings in these settings. What I discovered was that extracurricular activities allowed them to work as a team, such as playing a sport or singing a song as a group, and not have to carry the full load of the failure. However, I did think Jeff’s statement about making mistakes in art was interesting when he said, “...you can erase it from the page so you wouldn’t see your mistake.” He liked the idea of being able to erase his mistakes from the page to forget about the “failure.” I wondered if he felt this was different than making a mistake in an academic subject since he could erase those mistakes too, or if it was only valid for art. Overall, my perception of the GT students and their view of failure was that it challenged them in positive and negative ways depending on their emotional maturity.

Implications for Teachers

As I discussed in my literature review, there has not been much research done on the perceptions of GT students. After conducting my study I am more enlightened to their perceptions of school and how the GT mind works in general. However, I will say that there is still more to explore on this topic because every GT student is different, just like the other students in my class, so different things will be true for every child. The biggest takeaways or implications moving forward tie closely to the four major themes I found in the data, and they help me make sense of my findings.

One implication for teachers is it is important to not try to reinvent the wheel in order to challenge gifted and talented students. Through my research, I learned that many GT students have a way to challenge themselves in daily tasks. For example, Anne occasionally wrote in cursive when writing a story or when completing an assignment. This was not a requirement or something we encouraged her to do, but she did it as a means to get better at a writing goal she had for herself. A couple of the students liked to do mental math when completing their math packets in the morning, although they were required to show their work once they tried to solve it mentally. My cooperating teacher and I did not go above and beyond to give these students creative assignments or challenging tasks because we tried to challenge them authentically by prompting them with critical questions during group discussions, or allowing them to work with friends who thought differently than them. One way we stretched their learning was by giving them activity binders to keep in their desks that contained creative activities that stretched their learning. Activities in their binders included writing a story using a single picture, word puzzles, math problems reaching the thousands place value, and research outlines to research famous

historical figures. The students loved having these binders to work on when they finished their work early, and it lessened the question of “what do I do next?”

Another implication that was brought up by my cooperating teacher in her interview was that although GT students are not necessarily challenged to their maximum potential in academics, they can be challenged in social and emotional ways. This is something I had not thought about when considering the potential results of my study, but I think it is worth mentioning. Although this was not a major struggle for my GT students, it may be for others. One thing I thought was important that Miss G mentioned was to allow the students to work with peers who they do not get along with as well, and challenge them to be respectful and collaborative when working with those peers because that is a skill they will need in the future. She also said that emotionally they need to know it is okay to fail because that is what makes us human, and it allows the opportunity to grow. I could not agree with this more because I know many adults who to this day do not know how to handle their emotions well. Of course, this goes for all students, not just GT students. I believe all kids have this social and emotional challenge, and many times we as educators would rather glaze over these teachable moments than deal with the heart of the issue and teach them how to deal with those emotions and how to work well with others. This implication challenges me, but I think it is one of the most important because these are issues that do not go away after my students finish their education careers.

The final implication is the importance of allowing gifted students to be creative and express themselves through opportunities for creativity. I learned that GT students are incredibly creative whether that be artistically, in physical activities, in the way they communicate, or in their thought processes. I found that when they were given the chance to be creative they were more willing and motivated to accomplish a task; being creative prompted challenge in them,

and it motivated them to work hard to complete a task. All of the GT students said in one way or another that they enjoyed thinking in a different way than academic thinking, or thinking outside of the box.

More Wonderings

A wondering I still have is how the students' perception of school would be different if I would have conducted this study with an older group of GT students. How do their perceptions change as they go throughout school? I also thought about doing an independent study with the students. Would their perceptions of challenge and/or failure be different after participating in an independent study? I also wondered what it would have been like to observe them fail on a larger scale while engaging in an extracurricular activity. How would they have reacted? Would their peers encourage them as they usually do? Would the three students who had a growth mindset about failure still display this mindset in a frustrating situation? These are wonderings I still have because my study was only a month snapshot into their perceptions.

Conclusion

Conducting this study greatly intrigued me to continue to study gifted and talented students, perhaps on a smaller scale than an action research project. I learned that these students are unique in their thought process, but not in the way I was expecting. Observing their extracurricular gifts allowed me to expand my conceptions about what challenge and deep thinking really imply. Challenge does not have to be linked to academics, but in any subject that gives students the opportunity to think outside the box. This is why it is so important to incorporate cross-curricular curriculum so that students are stretched in multiple subjects, and so that they find how the interconnection between these subjects impacts their learning. My study also brings up the importance of socioemotional learning, so that students are successful in and

out of the school setting in their interactions and challenges. I am prompted to give my students, in present and future classrooms, the opportunity to seek and explore challenge in the realm of their choice, whether that be academic, social or emotional.

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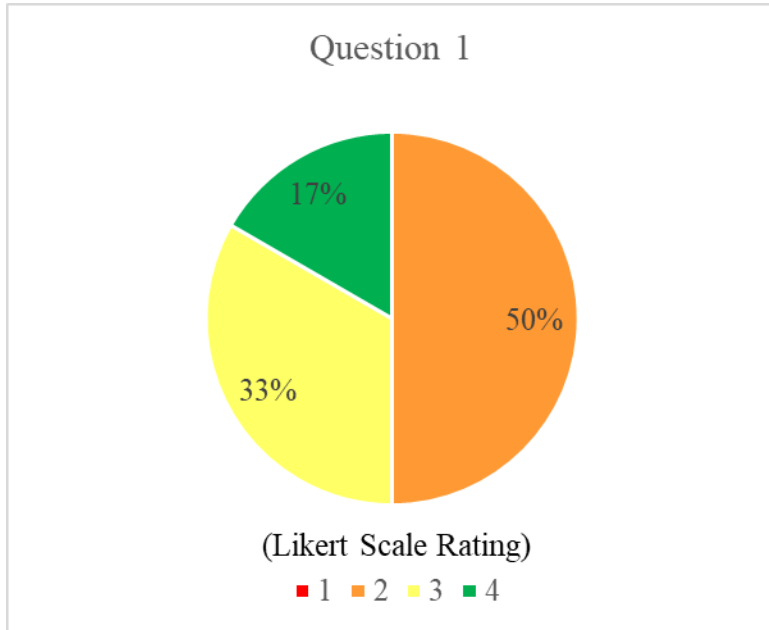
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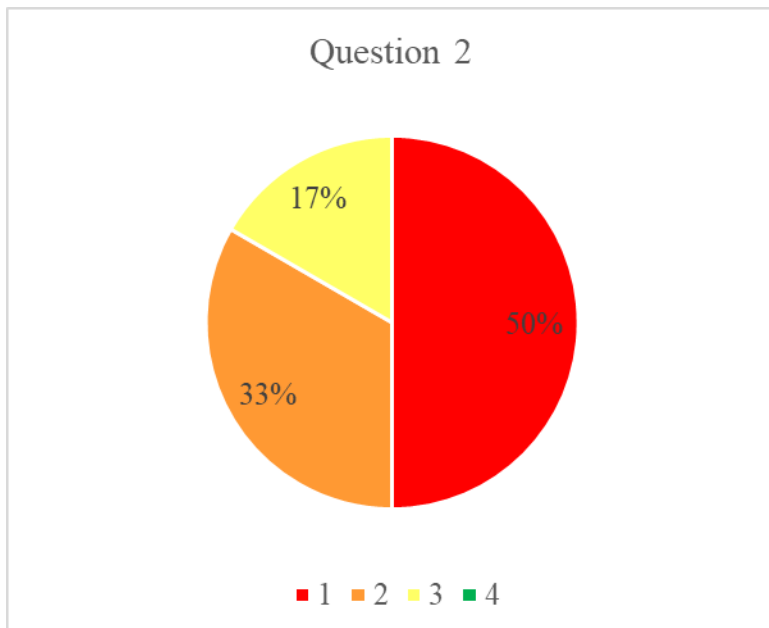
Appendix A

GT Student Perception Survey Results

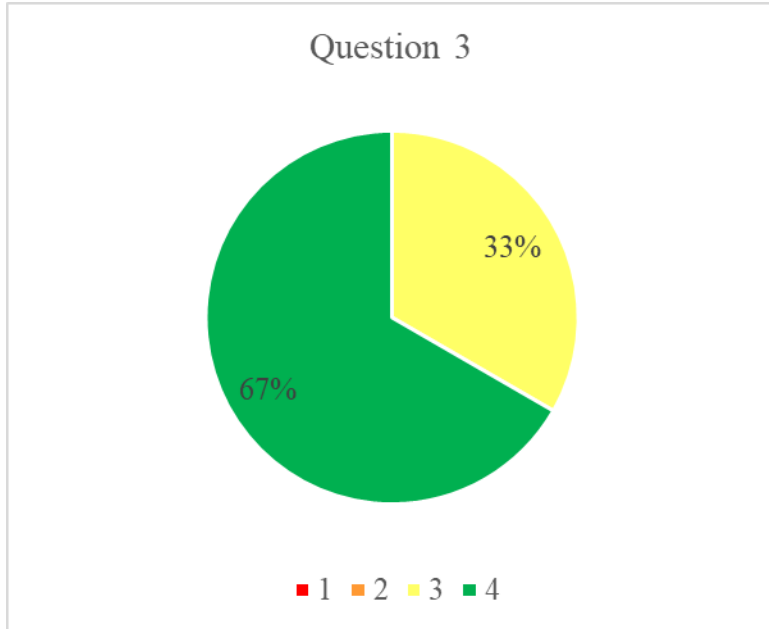
1) I feel excited about coming to school every day.



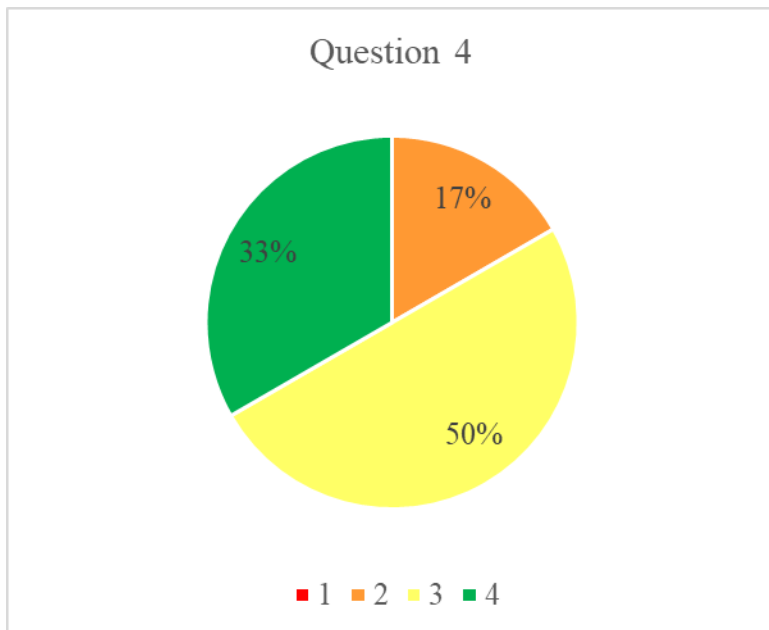
2) I feel challenged in school.



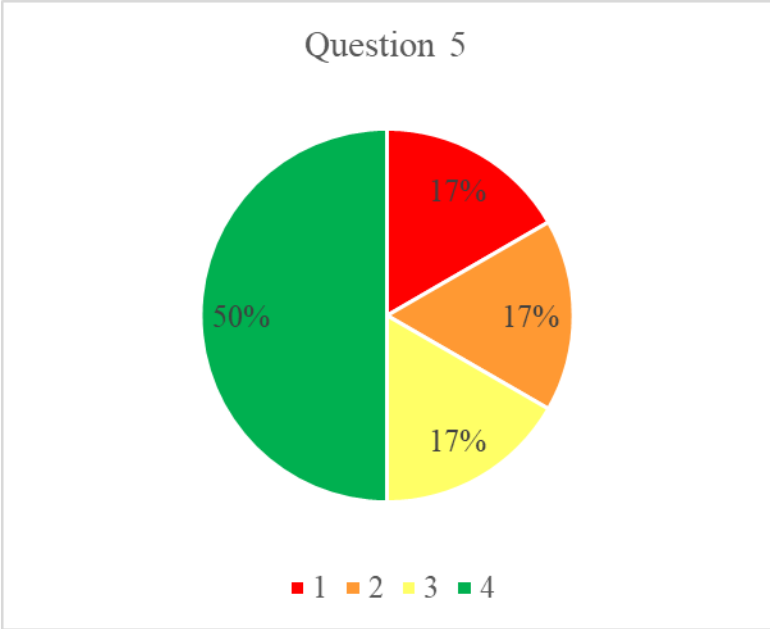
3) I have friends that are similar and different than me at school.



4) I feel sad or stressed when I fail an assignment or a task.



5) I feel that my teachers stretch my learning (or challenge me) on a regular basis.



Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Student Interview

- 1) How do you feel about coming to school every day? Tell me more about that.
- 2) In what ways, if any, are you challenged in school?
- 3) What is your favorite thing about school? Why?
- 4) What is your favorite subject and why? In what ways, if any, does this subject challenge you?
- 5) If you could change one thing about school what would it be and why?
- 6) How do you feel about taking learning risks in our classroom?
- 7) How do you feel about failing? Tell me more about that.
- 8) How do you feel about the people around you at school?
- 9) How do you pick your friends at school? How do these people affect your feelings about school?
- 10) How do you feel about being gifted and talented? Tell me more about that.
- 11) What is one thing you wish people knew about you as a learner that most people do not know? Why is that?

Teacher Interview

- 1) How would you describe a GT student?
- 2) How do you see them interact with their peers?
- 3) Have you noticed a common theme among their friendships and other social interactions?
- 4) In what ways, if any, do they empathize with their non-gifted peers?
- 5) How have you noticed them react to failure? Tell me more about that.
- 6) How do you feel about having the GT cluster of students?
- 7) What is one thing you have learned about them as learners? Tell me more about that.
- 8) What has surprised you about them? Tell me more about that.
- 9) What are some ways you stretch their learning?
- 10) What advice would you give teachers who have GT students for the first time?

Questions may vary and additional questions may be asked depending on the responses of the participants.

Appendix C

Codebook			
<i>Code Name</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
Creative thinking	1	Thinking that is alternative to academic thinking; imaginative	"...we're singing and we learn a lot from that, so what we do is...kind of like who we are."
Not excited about school	1	Negative perception about coming to school each day	"Well, I feel good about coming to school, but I'm not very excited."
Not challenged to max potential	1	The students are not being stretched to their full potential	"...I'm not as challenged as I would want to be..."
Deep thinking	1	Advanced thoughts about academic or personal subjects	"It makes my brain think really really deep and, um, sometimes I want to get away from that..."
Objective thinking	1	Black and white thinking; one answer	"...like reading there's like a couple of answers and math there's just one answer."
Real-world application	1	The students apply their learning outside of school in real-life situations	"...because if I'm challenged I can do more things outside of school."
Growth mindset	1	Mistakes allow for learning to occur	"Because if you make mistakes you can learn from them."
Teacher interaction preferred	1	The student prefers to talk to teachers because they understand her deep thinking	"And the teachers...like they understand what I'm trying to say."
Choose kind and trustworthy friends	1	Friends are nice and can be trusted	"...it's just that my like real friends I can trust."
Peers make school fun	1	Friends make coming to school enjoyable	"Well they makes it seem a lot more fun because like they're

			there..."
Everyone has some gifted in them	1	Everyone has something they are talented in	"...I feel like they should be counted as gifted and talented too."
Being gifted is multi-faceted	1	You can be gifted in more than one area	"...I think it's like all around, everywhere. Like...sports and drawing and music and stuff like that."
Traveling expands your horizons	1	Traveling allows for growth in personal and academic areas	"I can learn more about the other cultures and stuff."
Long texts are challenging	1	Big books can make reading challenging	"...like this really hard...this book and then make me summarize it, and then have questions about it..."
Setting long-term goals	1	Trying to reach reading goals by the end of the year	"I'm trying to make a million words and get 200 points..."
Excited about coming to school	1	Positive perception about coming to school each day	"It feels good because I get to learn and play with my friends."
Hands-on experiments are engaging	1	Science experiments make learning fun	"I mixed them up with some sanding stuff and then it turned from green to red."
Failing produces a negative attitude about learning	1	The students feel sad, mad and/or nervous about failing	"Well when I feel mad about failing, I usually throw a fit when I get home."
Some conflict/competition with peers	1	There is some opposition and competition between peers	"...then Jacob says it's not right and then we just have to start having a fight."
Standard for passing=100	1	They perceive failing as receiving a grade below 100%	"I don't know because I always get 100s."
Behavior interferes with excitement	1	The students become less excited about coming to school when they think about behavior challenges they could experience	"And I kind of feel nervous for like what kind of behavior I'm going to do today."



		throughout the day	
Not confident in test taking	1	They fear about failing tests	"...it's like harder than these tests that you can't look back into like the social studies..."
Green Not challenged to max potential...except for math (math can be challenging)	2	Math is the academic subject that each student said challenged them	"He asked me a division question, and that really stretched my brain because I didn't know division that much..."
Blue Extracurricular activities are a favorite	2	Activities such as P.E., music, art, and recess were their favorite activities to engage in	"Cause sometimes they can be fun, and I like art and I like playing around."
Purple Positive peer interactions	2	The students have positive perceptions of their peers as they claim they make school fun and are encouraging to them	"Like they make me feel better whenever I'm like...coming to school and after I failed a test."
Pink Perceptions of failure	2	Half of the students perceive failure as an opportunity to grow and learn, and half of them feel angry or sad about failing	"Actually...I don't think I've gotten a B before."

Appendix D



GT Student Perception Survey

Fill out the survey below by reading the statement and answering based on how you feel about the statement using the 1-4 scale. By rating the statement a 1, you are saying you strongly disagree with the statement. By rating the statement a 4, you are saying you strongly agree with the statement. You can rate the statement anywhere from 2-3 to say you feel somewhere in between disagreeing and agreeing with the statement.



1) I feel excited about coming to school every day.

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
			


2) I feel challenged in school.

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
			


3) I have friends that are similar and different than me at school.

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
			

4) I feel sad or stressed when I fail an assignment or a task.

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
			

5) I feel that my teachers stretch my learning (or challenge me) on a regular basis.

1	2	3	4
Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
			

6) Describe how you feel about school in 3 or more sentences.

7) What is your favorite thing about school?

8) If you could change one thing about school what would it be and why?

9) Do you feel that you are challenged in school? In what ways?

10) What are some things you wish your teacher did to stretch your learning or challenge you?