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KNOWLEDGE, PERCEPTIONS, AND BELIEFS OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS
REGARDING WHOLE-GRADE ACCELERATION FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Allison A. Sheppard

December 14, 2017

KNOWLEDGE, PERCEPTIONS, AND BELIEFS OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS
REGARDING WHOLE-GRADE ACCELERATION FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

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Dedication

I learned, truly, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

This paper is dedicated to my parents. My father was the type of educator I always aspired to be and my mom has endured the ups and downs of this journey with unfailing encouragement, support, and wisdom. Thank you, too, to my sister for her example of an academic who always has time to provide assistance and listen to my concerns.

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On a personal level, it has taken a village to get me here. My mom has always been there to nurture, support, and encourage me to just write. Thank you to my sister for her support, albeit long-distance, and willingness to listen and provide insight. I am also appreciative of the many work colleagues who have encouraged me along the way. It is hard to balance life, work, and doctoral work, but I have always been grateful to those of you who supported me. Most recently, thank you to my current colleagues for being cheerleaders and encouraging me to finish the journey. Thank you.

My first case of whole-grade acceleration occurred because I believed in the potential of one young five-year-old, even when the kindergarten teacher said “No.” In the face of reluctance from not only the kindergarten teacher, but senior leadership, I knew that acceleration, when used with knowledge and appropriate tools, could provide successful results for the students. I knew better for that first young student. Ben – you forever changed the course of my professional life. Thank you.

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Abstract

This study used a case study research design to investigate the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs of elementary principals regarding whole-grade acceleration for gifted students. The research literature is overwhelmingly positive on student outcomes – academically, socially, and emotionally. However, little research exists on the impact of principal leadership and the use of acceleration as an academic option. The study explored principals’ prior training, personal and professional experiences with whole-grade acceleration. In addition, the research questions aimed to understand what participants considered to be both benefits and challenges with acceleration. The theoretical framework for this study was human capital theory that is frequently used in both educational policymaking and educational research. The theory posits that investing in education and job training programs, among others, yields positive outcomes over time for both students and society. Findings from this study revealed that elementary principals are cautious about using this option regardless of the robust research that supports acceleration. In addition, the study revealed a dearth of knowledge and experiences among participants with whole-grade acceleration. A discussion of implications for practice and policy is included. The study highlights a need for substantive policy, specific planning to provide research best practice guidelines and processes for school districts, as well as strong leadership. Recommendations for future study are addressed that could add to the body of literature.

Keywords: whole-grade acceleration, grade skipping, gifted students, elementary principals, principal leadership, human capital theory

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Imagine a school where all students have access to the exact interventions needed for their academic, social, and emotional success—a place where the principal, the quintessential instructional leader, supports best research practices for teaching and learning. Unfortunately, principals are increasingly required to oversee numerous programs in their schools—special education, English learner services, and Title 1—as well as gifted education. In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act legislation ([NCLB], 2001), which required school administrators to provide evidence that all students were making academic progress, changed the landscape in schools. Most recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; as cited in Civic Impulse, 2016), replaced NCLB. While it reflects a more flexible approach to student testing and school accountability, it maintains the same requirements of high standards, accountability, and closing the achievement gap (Korte, 2015). Therefore, due to the responsibilities of principals, whether first from NCLB, or from ESSA, program demands, or ever-changing school demographics, schools are not always a place where each and every student, especially every gifted student, gets the exact intervention needed (Lewis, Cruzeiro, & Hall, 2007). Moreover, the authors argued that the emphasis on the achievement of low-performing students takes the focus away from the needs of high-ability learners. A. W. Hoy and W. K. Hoy (2003) claimed there is “a growing recognition that gifted students are being poorly

served by most public schools” (p. 39). This may be reflected in whole-grade acceleration not being employed as a viable option for gifted students.

Background Information for the Study

Whole-grade acceleration, the topic of much research and study, is an intervention that allows students to progress through the curriculum at faster rates or at younger ages (Pressey, 1949). During the past 80 years overwhelming evidence has shown the positive effects of acceleration on students academically, socially, and emotionally (Assouline, Colangelo, VanTassel-Baska, & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2015; Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, Lipscomb, & Forstadt, 2003; Cross, Andersen, & Mammadov, 2015; Lupkowski-Shoplik, Assouline, & Colangelo, 2015; Rogers, 2004, 2015; Southern & Jones, 2015).

Despite the evidence of its viability, acceleration may be underutilized in this country (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). Gold (1965) wrote, “No paradox is more striking than the inconsistency between research findings on acceleration and the failure of our society to reduce the time spent by superior students in formal education” (p. 328). Unfortunately, fearing negative academic or social outcomes, school administrators tend to be reluctant to have students skip a grade. School personnel have emphasized bringing students up to a minimal level of proficiency. While many researchers have studied the outcomes of grade acceleration (McClarty, 2015; Rogers, 2004), few have examined the reasons for school personnel’s reluctance to consider acceleration (Wells, Lohman, & Marron, 2009). Consequently, a chasm exists between what the research reveals and the practice of school principals.

In this study, I investigated the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs elementary principals have about acceleration as an academic option for gifted students. The researcher sought to gain a better understanding of ways to advocate for acceleration by providing results that inform and educate school personnel about the outcomes for students who skip a grade. In addition, I hope that the discussion of the findings provides recommendations for decision-makers and district leaders to consider about the practice of acceleration.

Background of the Researcher and My Relationship to the Study

Education was ingrained in me as the most important vehicle for future success and was the central theme in our home. My parents and a sibling attended prestigious institutions of higher education. In addition, I spent two formative years living in Europe where I experienced a different culture, language, and education. Maxwell (2005) wrote, “Separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks” (p. 38). I find this to resonate with me as a researcher. As a result of my childhood years, I was forever changed and different from my peers. Today I am an administrator for gifted programs in a medium-sized suburban school district in southeastern Virginia.

In 2007, I met the precocious son of a colleague and was asked to administer some testing to see if the child might qualify for a gifted summer program at a local university. The boy was two years younger than the average starting age of attendees and the university was reluctant to accept a four-year-old without proof of superior testing scores. Two years later, when he was in kindergarten, his parents requested that he be considered for whole-grade acceleration. Unfortunately, the principal and his classroom

teacher were philosophically and decidedly opposed to acceleration. This was the first case of acceleration I administered using the Iowa Acceleration Scale tool (Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, et al., 2003) and its child study approach. The results? He was found to be an excellent candidate for acceleration and went from kindergarten at the end of the school year to begin second grade the next school year. Today, he is an academically and socially well-adjusted student at a premier public high school for gifted students.

As a result of this initial experience in particular, and other encounters in general, I set out to learn more about whole-grade acceleration. Around this time, the school district where I worked was inundated by a sudden increase in acceleration requests, yet the infrastructure to address the requests was inconsistent across schools. So, I became the de facto expert and worked with varied stakeholders to develop guidelines, practices, and policy regarding acceleration options. My interactions with school personnel continued to increase my interest in learning more about the pervasive resistance I encountered. I had difficulty balancing what I found in the literature to be the overwhelmingly positive effects for accelerants versus principals' reluctance to consider acceleration.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs of elementary principals related to the use of whole-grade acceleration with high-ability learners. In addition, their prior training in gifted education, background experiences, and demographic variables were examined. The researcher also explored in what ways, if any, personal philosophies about education in general, and acceleration

more specifically, are positively or negatively influenced by district-wide policies and practices. I used an interview protocol to glean information from volunteer participants about acceleration. I hoped that findings from this study would provide implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides a context for investigating relationships. Strayhorn (2010) defined theory as a “set of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomenon” (p. 178). Such a framework enabled me to look at constructs in new or different ways in order to understand better the ways in which whole-grade acceleration has been contextualized.

The theoretical framework for this study relied on human capital theory that is frequently used as an economic framework in educational policymaking and educational research (Netcoh, 2016). Modern human capital theory comes out of the work of Schultz (1961, 1971) and economist and Nobel Prize winner (in economics for his work on human capital theory) Gary Becker (1964, 1993). Schultz (1961) tested theories of capital to study the value of human capital. At his presidential address to the American Economic Association in 1960, he reasoned that human capital is an important commodity by saying that

The failure to treat human resources explicitly as a form of capital, as a produced means of production, as the product of investment, has fostered the retention of the classical notion of labor as a capacity to do manual work requiring little

knowledge and skill, a capacity with which, according to this notion, laborers are endowed about equally. (Schultz, 1961, p. 3)

He believed in the idea that any investment, including an investment in human capital, would yield positive results.

Similarly, Becker (2008) posited that different forms of capital, like stocks or a bank account, yield income and other outcomes over long periods of time. However, he suggested that not only are there tangible types of capital, but there are intangible ones such as higher wages, good health, or quality of life and, therefore, investments in education, health care, or training are also investments in human capital (Becker, 2008).

Systemic reform in schools to more fully address the academic needs of high-ability learners depends on strong principal leadership. Their support is essential in encouraging all personnel to make appropriate educational interventions available for gifted students. Robinson and Moon (2003) conducted a cross-case analysis to study advocacy on behalf of gifted students, and their findings concluded that leadership is the most crucial component for success. If principals consider that the education gifted students are provided plays a key role in future success by building skills and knowledge, administrators will help to increase students' degree of capital. Human capital theorists, in fact, have contended that education is paramount in enhancing productivity and income equality (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961).

Loomis and Rodriguez (2009) stated that education provides knowledge and skills that prepare students for future employment. However, they were concerned that often the institution that is school becomes "standardized" and, as a result, "good education shifts toward measures of attainment (credentials obtained) and away from the actual

possession of commensurate knowledge and skills (human capital)” (p. 510). In addition, they argued that those students with considerable education earn more than students who drop out, thereby decreasing their capital (Loomis & Rodriguez, 2009). In an age of accountability and the requirement that principals provide evidence that students are meeting minimum standards, it is not difficult to envision whole-grade acceleration as not being considered as a way to increase gifted students’ human capital.

For this study, there was no intention to test the theory of human capital. Rather, within the context of education providing the skills and knowledge to increase human capital, the intention was to set the backdrop for principals who are considering whole-grade acceleration for gifted students.

Statement of the Problem

Since early in the 20th century, many research studies have been conducted on acceleration. As a result, overwhelming evidence has been collected related to the positive effects of acceleration, academically, socially, and emotionally (Rogers, 2004, 2015). And yet it has remained a largely untapped academic option for gifted students. Principals are faced with ever-increasing demands to be the building manager, instructional leader, and human resources specialist, and may not have the time, interest, inclination, or knowledge to support acceleration. Prior experiences and knowledge, combined with any potential bias or prejudice, may preclude grade skipping from being considered.

Significance of the Problem

The problem is significant because whole-grade acceleration may not be considered as an educational option for gifted students. Individualized services are

expected for special education or English language learners, so why not grade acceleration for high-ability learners? In today's age of accountability, a principal may be reluctant to consider acceleration because his primary goal is to provide evidence that students are meeting minimum standards. This focus may impact gifted learners' access to appropriate academic differentiation, including acceleration. They may be the ones "left behind."

The benefits of acceleration on students are not usually a focus for school personnel. In fact, in my professional experiences, they have resisted utilizing whole-grade acceleration due to an overriding concern for students' social and emotional health. Another strongly held belief is that students need to remain with age-based peers. This study further investigated the paradox between generally positive academic and social outcomes of accelerants and the reluctance by elementary principals to consider grade skipping. Study results will augment the body of research and help to inform future practice.

Research Questions

The research questions to be addressed in this study were:

1. What background knowledge do elementary school principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
2. What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
3. What training in gifted education do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

4. What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?
5. What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the challenges/liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

Method

A case study research design methodology was used to investigate elementary principals' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration. As noted in Yin (2003), case study methodology allows the researcher to explore individuals and organizations and the interrelationships between them. One advantage of case study research is that the participants are able to "share their stories" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). More specifically, an exploratory type of case study was utilized because the intervention being investigated had no clear outcome (Yin, 2003). After a report of each individual case, a cross-case analysis was conducted to investigate additional themes and patterns among the cases (Glesne, 2006; Yin, 2014).

Definitions of Terms

Accelerant is the student who skips a grade during his or her academic career.

Accelerative options are comprised of the 21 possible content-based and grade-based acceleration educational interventions for gifted students.

Gifted learners are, according to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) Glossary of Terms,

those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. These domains include

any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports). (NAGC, n.d.)

Grade skipping is a synonym for whole-grade acceleration whereby gifted students skip one grade's worth of curriculum and continue on to the next grade.

Human capital theory is a framework that posits that investment in education, health care, and job training are capital investments that will yield future economic and social returns for both the individual and society (Netcoh, 2016).

Retention is the practice of holding back a student in order for him or her to repeat the same grade for a second time.

School logistics for the purpose of this study refers to the detailed administration of all of the complex operations of running schools. These include the coordination of people, programs, resources, and facilities.

Whole-grade acceleration, as defined by the NAGC (2004), "allows a student to move through traditional educational organizations more rapidly, based on readiness and motivation" (p. 1). Students who are whole-grade accelerated skip one full academic year of education.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Related Literature

For this study, a review of the literature related to whole-grade acceleration was conducted. Empirical studies and meta-analyses were studied to understand outcomes of students who were accelerated—academically, socially, and emotionally. The theoretical framework of human capital theory was examined. Research on school district practices and policies about acceleration in the United States were reviewed. In addition, stakeholder perspectives about acceleration, including the influence of principal leadership were studied. Finally, a review of the literature on possible limitations to whole-grade acceleration is included in this chapter.

Acceleration as an educational intervention dates back to at least 1868 when it was used in elementary schools in St. Louis, Missouri (Freeman, 1920). This grade skipping strategy was employed to ensure gifted students could complete subjects rapidly but without gaps in their knowledge (Gold, 1965). VanTassel-Baska (1991) argued for the use of acceleration to break up the lock-step notion in American schools that students should always be with their age peers. In fact, Gold (1965) noted that in addition to grade skipping, additional accelerative options were subsequently introduced in school systems throughout the United States. Kulik and Kulik (1984) maintained that acceleration became an educational intervention to meet the needs of gifted students.

Researchers have consistently reported positive effects on students as a result of academic acceleration (Assouline et al., 2015; Colangelo et al., 2004; Gross & van Vliet,

2005; Kulik, 2004; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1992; Vialle, Ashton, Carlton, & Rankin, 2001). Students who skip a grade have been found to outperform older peers academically while showing comparable social and emotional development (Colangelo et al., 2004; Kulik, 2004; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1984, 1992; Saylor & Brookshire, 1993; Southern & Jones, 1991). Empirical studies on acceleration have demonstrated the benefits to students—and without evidence of psychosocial difficulties (Kent, 1992; Kulik, 2004; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1984, 1989, 1992; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). Most recently, in fact, Cross et al. (2015) noted an ever-increasing body of research that demonstrates there is a small to medium positive psychological effect on students who skip a grade. Significantly, however, policies and practices often hinder the use of acceleration as an educational intervention. Teacher and administrator knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences with acceleration can negatively affect whether it is being considered for gifted students. This is especially true if parents encounter resistance from school personnel (Lohman & Marron, 2008).

In 2004, the landmark publication *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*, a national report by the University of Iowa and the Templeton Foundation, provided key findings from 50 years of research (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). The authors maintained that acceleration, while previously the least accepted intervention for gifted students, is the most effective strategy for the whole student socially, emotionally, and academically. Although previous reviews of the benefits of acceleration have been consistently positive, perceptions by school personnel (or gatekeepers) have been markedly negative (Colangelo et al., 2004). In commenting on the resistance of educators to employ this intervention, Borland wrote:

Acceleration is one of the most curious phenomena in the field of education. I can think of no other issue in which there is such a gulf between what research has revealed and what practitioners believe. The research on acceleration is so uniformly positive, the benefits of appropriate acceleration so unequivocal, that it is difficult to see how an educator can oppose it. (as cited in Colangelo et al., 2004, p. 16)

The conversation that began in 2004 has continued over the past decade. A follow-up publication, *A Nation Empowered: Evidence Trumps the Excuses Holding Back America's Brightest Students* (Assouline et al., 2015) presented updated information and insight related to the use of accelerative options. The editors noted that when *A Nation Deceived* was published a decade earlier, there was little evidence to determine the effects of NCLB on high-ability learners. However, in *A Nation Empowered*, 33 experts in the field of gifted education and acceleration provided clear findings about the positive impact of acceleration. In fact, Assouline et al. (2015) asserted, "In 2004, the evidence about the effectiveness of academic acceleration as an intervention was unequivocal and strong. Today, that evidence continues to accrue and demonstrate positive results that are robust and unambiguous" (p. 1). Rogers (2015) underscored the momentum since *A Nation Deceived*, noting "there has been increased attention on viewing academic acceleration as an intervention and educator acceptance of acceleration as a viable evidence-based practice in schools" (p. 19).

Effects of Acceleration on Students' Social and Emotional Development

In their meta-analysis, Steenbergen-Hu and Moon (2011) studied available empirical research regarding the effects of whole-grade acceleration on high-ability

learners' social and emotional development. They reviewed a total of 38 primary studies conducted between 1984 and 2008. Their findings were consistent with previous meta-analyses suggesting that acceleration has a positive impact on social-emotional development and academic achievement. The effect size for academic achievement was 0.180 and less significant was the effect size for social and emotional development of 0.076. The authors argued that more research was needed to bridge the gap between documented positive effects of acceleration on high-ability learners and a disconnect between school decision-makers who determine whether an acceleration request will be honored. In fact, they wrote, "effects of acceleration remained vague to educational administrators, teachers, and parents, although considerable evidence regarding the benefits of acceleration had been documented in the literature" (Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011, p. 50).

Gifted students' perceptions about their social and emotional health tend to be only slightly more underreported than their academic self-concept (Lee, Olszweski-Kubilius, & Thomson, 2012). In fact, intellectual giftedness in students is generally a positive attribute socially and emotionally and gifted students tend to be well-received by peers (Gross, 2006; Neihart, 2007). However, some research has suggested that students who feel as if they are "different" may self-report feelings of not fitting into a social situation (Coleman & Cross, 1988). This asynchrony between academic self-concept and feelings of social unease may lead to difficulty in forming or maintaining peer relationships (Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1993). However, there is little evidence to support the notion that gifted students are any more likely than non-gifted peers to encounter rejection (Gronostaj, Werner, Bochow, & Vock, 2015; Lee et al., 2012). Many

of these studies indicated that gifted students were more likely to be well-liked by others, and sometimes even more so than their non-gifted peers.

Whole-grade accelerated students have reported more positive social and emotional feelings than before acceleration (Gronostaj et al., 2015; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 2002; Vialle et al., 2001). Accelerants have also reported more positive self-concepts about school, but less positive social self-concept than non-accelerated students (Hoogeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2009). Gifted students who are not accelerated or are postponed in acceleration may be at risk of underachievement and maladaptive behaviors such as social and emotional problems (DeLacy, 2000; Feldhusen, 2003; Gross, 1994). However, Gronostaj, Werner, Bochow, and Vock (2015) found that the participants in the study vocalized positive feelings from having been grade skipped. In addition, results from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY) showed that early acceleration promoted significant growth in self-esteem among gifted male students and among gifted, honors, and non-identified gifted students (Ma, 2002).

In a longitudinal study of the long-term effects of acceleration on students' social and emotional development, Richardson and Benbow (1990) found that at age 23, the accelerated students reported high self-esteem and internal locus of control, as well as a strong sense of self-efficacy. The participants reported that their social and emotional development was, in fact, positively impacted by having been grade accelerated. Swiatek and Benbow (1991) also reported similar results in their 10-year longitudinal study of highly gifted accelerated students. They maintained that these students reported high degrees of positive psychosocial development five years after the grade skipping

occurred. In addition, Gross (2006) used the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory in her 20-year longitudinal study of highly gifted students who were accelerated at least one grade. Her findings were consistent with earlier studies, with overall positive self-reporting of self-esteem as a result of the grade skipping intervention.

Sayler and Brookshire (1993) focused on the social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment of accelerated students in the eighth grade. Mean scores of accelerated students were compared with the mean scores for two overlapping comparison groups. Accelerated students reported no unusual social isolation or severe emotional difficulties and fewer behavioral problems than the students who were not accelerated. Whole-grade accelerated students noted more positive social and emotional feelings than before acceleration (J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 2002; Vialle et al., 2001). Indeed, in her research synthesis, Rogers (2015) concluded that small to moderate social and emotional gains were produced in those students who were accelerated. Vialle et al. (2001) examined the positive outcomes of acceleration on students' social-emotional maturity when the curriculum was challenging and students were allowed input in designing their instruction. Feldhusen, Proctor, and Black (2002) found no empirical evidence that whole-grade acceleration results in social-emotional maladjustment; furthermore, objective measures of student performance suggested greater than lesser academic performance.

More recently, Cross et al. (2015) reviewed decades of research on gifted students both socially and emotionally. They concluded that "the effect of acceleration on psychological adjustment is, in the worst case, not negative and, at best, is small and positive" (p. 37). In a research study synthesizing six meta-analyses on acceleration,

Rogers (2015) articulated findings similar to those in Cross et al. (2015). In her study, all grade-based accelerative options, including whole-grade acceleration, reported moderate to strong effect sizes. Rogers (2015) clearly emphasized “what is promising about this most recent meta-analysis is the remarkable focus on social and psychological outcomes that was not as evident and consistent in previous syntheses” (p. 27).

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory has its modern roots in the work of Becker (1964, 1993) and Schultz (1961, 1971), each of whom emphasized the importance of education on economic growth. Human capital theory argues that expenditures in education, healthcare, and job training will yield social and economic returns for both society and individuals (Netcoh, 2016). It consists of the sum of the knowledge and skills that people develop for their economic and productivity potential (Baptiste, 2001). A school is a place that affords opportunities for students for their future success as quantified by increased income, professional opportunities, and/or quality of life. Schultz (1961) stressed that economic growth is dependent on investment in education when he wrote:

I propose to treat education as an investment in man [*sic*] and to treat its consequences as a form of capital. Since education becomes a part of the person receiving it, I shall refer to it as human capital . . . it is a form of capital if it renders a productive service of value to the economy. (p. 571)

Bontis (2002) noted that human capital is so valued because “it is a source of innovation and strategic renewal” (p. 631). In fact, Schultz (1981) maintained that “there have been important advances in economic thinking with respect to investment in human capital—most of the work thus far has concentrated on [education]” (p. 8).

While Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961) are considered the fathers of modern human capital theory, its roots can actually be traced to the work of Adam Smith who introduced the idea that humans could be considered a form of capital (Baptiste, 2001). John Stuart Mill further advanced the work of Smith by arguing that human capital is made up of skill and knowledge capabilities (Baptiste, 2001). Over 200 years later, the theory of human capital continued to be built on their founding ideas, using neoclassical growth models in which individuals become more capable of gaining and keeping capital based on the degree to which there is investment in accumulating skills and knowledge (Lin, 2001). Lin (2001) further posited, “This choice action is the primary and sometimes the only explanatory force employed in human capital theory” (p. 18). In addition, Lev and Daum (2004) argued that intangible capital (noncapital) has become a valuable asset in today’s knowledge economy and that intangible assets are related to the future and potential for growth and income. Olssen, Codd, and O’Neill (2004) theorized that education and training increase individuals’ cognitive capacity which, in turn, increases productivity which leads to increased income and, by extension, increased human capital.

Arguably, exceptional human capital is at the core of global economic productivity (Friedman, 2007; Hunt, 2011). In a longitudinal study following high-ability learners over three decades, Park, Lubinski, and Benbow (2013) suggested that in emerging economic markets, those individuals with the greatest human capital will not only maintain, but advance the social and economic well-being of its citizens. Their study was a response to a report of the National Science Board (2010) on the importance of human capital development that noted, “The long-term prosperity of our Nation will

increasingly rely on talented and motivated individuals who will comprise the vanguard of scientific, and technological innovation” (p. v). Stanley (2000) argued that gifted students who are provided a learning environment that supports their academic needs as well as their social and emotional development increases the possibility that they will make noteworthy contributions to society. In fact, Colangelo et al. (2004) maintained that high-ability learners require appropriate learning environments for their optimal growth. Similarly, assessing exceptional cognitive abilities in students early in their time in school prepares them for maximizing their potential in those situations required for complex information processing and creativity (Park, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2006). The authors argued that human capital development is important for helping society to advance in an information age that demands expertise in professions such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

A student’s degree of human capital can be increased or decreased by experiences in schools. Traag and van der Velden (2011) noted that the most important factor in students being successful in school is their cognitive ability. Unfortunately, the authors found that when students leave school early without receiving a diploma, their human capital is decreased, which has “severe consequences for the life course of individual people, as well as a negative impact on society as a whole” (p. 45). Likewise, in a subsequent research study, McMullen and Rouse (2012) specifically found that students’ academic skills, or human capital account, tends to grow when students are in school and, likewise, decreases when a student is not in school.

Gifted students who skip a grade may increase their human capital in several ways. Park et al. (2013) used data from a 40-year longitudinal study of 3,467 accelerants

and their educational and professional outcomes. The researchers reported that whole-grade acceleration directly affected the likelihood that the students would pursue advanced degrees and would finish their training earlier than age peers. They argued, “an earlier career start from acceleration will allow an individual to devote more time in early adulthood to creative production, and this will result in an increased level of accomplishment over the course of one’s career” (p. 177). In addition, the researchers found that a greater percentage of accelerants obtained earned Ph.Ds. in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields, were published in STEM publications, and obtained patents at a greater rate than the control group of non-grade skippers. Human capital can be increased and invested when administrators are willing to consider and use whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students.

School District Practices Regarding Whole-grade Acceleration in the United States

There are many reasons why acceleration is underutilized in the United States. The simplest may be that school systems lack familiarity with acceleration and the research available on the topic. Colangelo et al. (2004) provided a review of decades of research and articulated the positive benefits of using acceleration for gifted students. Commenting on whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention, Ambrose, VanTassel-Baska, Coleman, and Cross (2010) argued that schools “[are] devoid of the approach in most settings, even those where gifted students are self-contained” (p. 467).

There are some who would argue that the pressure on schools to meet minimum competencies has greatly impacted differentiation in classrooms. For example, Hargrove (2012) argued that the demands to meet minimum standards and the lack of incentives for schools to focus on the advanced learning needs of some have perpetuated a level of

mediocrity. This may well lead to boredom and underachievement with gifted students. Unfortunately, “America’s school systems keep bright students in line by forcing them to learn in a lock-step manner with their classmates. Teachers and principals disregard students’ desires to learn more—much more—than they are being taught” (Colangelo et al., 2004, p. 1). Cross (2002) posited changing the term from acceleration to “opportunity to learn” or “appropriate pacing” might sway school personnel to reconsider this educational intervention as an appropriate form of rigor and challenge for gifted learners. In so doing, gifted students’ social and emotional characteristics would similarly be developed.

VanTassel-Baska (1986, 1991) maintained that research in support of acceleration is often ignored due to school systems’ conservative approach to education. Acceleration may challenge the democratic notion that only some students may be able to “get ahead” while others may have educational gaps. School personnel believe students need to have a peer group that is age-based within six months in order to develop appropriately.

School staff are committed to the whole child, often believing “safe is better than sorry” because harm may result if children are pushed, or gaps in their knowledge base may occur if they skip a grade (Colangelo et al., 2004). In the 1980s, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NSEYC), one of whose goals is to influence and support policies and legislation that affect the education, health, and welfare of children and their families, became alarmed at evidence suggesting harm could come to children if accelerated. The association published a position statement (NSEYC, 2001) intended to protect children from inappropriately high demands on their intellectual and affective abilities. Southern, Jones, and Fiscus (1989) surveyed a variety

of school personnel about their attitudes regarding accelerative options. The major concern of all groups was the potential social and emotional damage if students skip a grade. However, research consistently demonstrates not only academic but also social and emotional benefits (Colangelo et al., 2004). The research support for acceleration is “robust and consistent and allows us to state confidently that carefully planned acceleration decisions are successful” (Colangelo et al., 2010, p. 187).

Southern et al. (1989) surveyed a variety of educational leaders about attitudes regarding acceleration. The authors found that educators were reluctant to use early entry to kindergarten or first grade acceleration options. Similarly, Southern and Jones (1991) reported that when classroom teachers were aware a student had been accelerated, they were more likely to attribute any difficulties to the grade skipping than to other school-based issues. Moreover, school personnel often reason that grade acceleration should not be employed because it may adversely affect students’ social or emotional well-being (Colangelo et al., 2004; Southern et al., 1989).

Grade acceleration can be an effective intervention for gifted learners when there is positive support from the school during the decision-making process (Lohman & Marron, 2008). However, the authors noted that their acceleration survey results revealed that when parents know that school personnel are resistant to considering grade acceleration, the parents are less willing to propose it. The authors contended that the lack of clear acceleration policies that allow grade acceleration to be used as educational interventions, as well as the often-negative attitudes of school personnel, stand as “perennial roadblocks” to the implementation of school practices (Lohman & Marron, 2008, p. 5).

School District Policies Regarding Whole-grade Acceleration in the United States

Neihart (2007) suggested that educational leaders should employ research about acceleration when evaluating school and district practices and then institute policies that reflect best practice. Used appropriately, acceleration is the most effective intervention for enhancing the academic growth of advanced students (J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1989).

Feldhusen et al. (2002) maintained that whole-grade acceleration decisions need to include a comprehensive individual assessment using guidelines that can be measured to remove subjectivity or teacher bias in the decision-making process. Therefore, school districts should be introduced to a research-based measure such as the Iowa Acceleration Scale (IAS; Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, et al., 2003). Developed after 20 years of research and clinical and field work with students who were grade accelerated, the IAS is a systematic, holistic, and objective way to make informed recommendations to all stakeholders. Modeled after the Light's Retention Scale, the IAS was developed to help educators and parents make educated decisions (Forstadt, Assouline, & Colangelo, 2007).

In 2010, the National Work Group on Acceleration was created with representation from the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), the Institute for Research and Policy on Acceleration (IRPA), and the Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted (CSDPG). The Work Group recommended that:

Each school district have a written acceleration policy stating that: acceleration is an appropriate and effective intervention for select highly able students who have demonstrated high performance in one or more academic areas. The policy

should be characterized by accessibility, equity, and openness. It should provide guidelines for the implementation of acceleration, including administrative matters, to ensure fair and systematic use of accelerative opportunities and recognition for participation in those accelerative opportunities. Finally, the policy should provide guidelines for preventing nonacademic barriers to the use of acceleration as an educational intervention and include features that prevent unintended consequences of acceleration. (Colangelo et al., 2010, p. 181)

Finally, VanTassel-Baska (2015) underscored the importance of policy development in gifted education because, she argued, “research on the effectiveness of acceleration is the bedrock for best practice in gifted education” (p. 43). School leaders need to be aware of the impact of any decision not to consider whole-grade acceleration. In a recent article on the social and emotional effects of acceleration on students, Cross et al. (2015) argued that it is important for decision makers to understand that the “withholding of acceleration opportunities . . . can have a bigger and longer lasting negative effect on adjustment than the provision of acceleration opportunities” (p. 39).

The *State of the states in gifted education survey and report 2014-2015* was released as a collaborative effort between the CSDPG and NAGC (NAGC, 2015). The biennial report provides, among other things, information on state policies related to acceleration. One key finding was state reports underscored that federal policy in gifted education could benefit high ability students, families, and educators.

As of 2015, 13 state policies permit acceleration while no state policy prohibits its use. Twelve states’ policies leave the decision to the local education agency (LEA) and 15 states have no policy, so it is left up to the LEA to determine whether or not to have a

policy. *Guidelines for developing an academic acceleration policy* (IRPA, NAGC, & CSDPG, 2009) noted,

Much policy work remains to be done in making sure that policies exist to serve those students who should be accelerated but for various reasons are not. The existence of a state or local policy does not necessarily mean that the policy is based on research or favorable toward acceleration. (p. 15)

According to the *Guidelines* (IRPA, NAGC, & CSDPG, 2009), high-ability students need a continuum of gifted services to meet their needs. Gifted students need flexibility, yet too often school districts match curriculum and instruction to a student's age rather than ability. In addition, "absence of a formal policy might invite inconsistent practices that could even discourage acceleration" (p. 1). Finally,

An acceleration policy is a means to guide individual districts in implementing acceleration practices. A policy must promote awareness and adoption of sound accelerative practices. The research-based guidelines for developing an academic acceleration policy proposed here can serve as a concrete tool to guide policy makers, school administrators, and educators to create or modify policies at the state and school district levels. (p. 1)

As published in the *Guidelines* (IRPA, NAGC, & CSDPG, 2009), robust policy on acceleration has five recommended elements—1) the policy is characterized by accessibility, equity, and openness; 2) the policy provides implementation guidelines; 3) the policy provides processes to ensure systematic use and access to acceleration; 4) the policy addresses possible non-academic barriers to acceleration being considered, and; 5) the policy provides guidelines to ward off unintended consequences.

Principal Leadership and Student Achievement

Systemic reform in schools that will more fully address the academic needs of high-ability learners largely depends on leadership by principals. Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) underscored the importance of a principal's influence by arguing that high expectations "influence student achievement by shaping the school's instructional climate and instructional organization" (p. 142). Principals' support is essential in encouraging all personnel to make appropriate educational interventions for gifted students. Robinson and Moon (2003) conducted a cross-case analysis to study advocacy on behalf of gifted students. Their findings concluded that leadership is the most crucial component for success. The authors argued that motivation, change agents, self-reflection, knowledge of gifted education, and leadership skills are all important if transformational leadership is to occur.

The hallmark of an effective principal is being a strong instructional leader, not just a building manager. In order to ensure student achievement, principals must be engaged in the teaching and learning process (DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Many studies have reported findings of a strong correlation between principal leadership and student achievement and instructional effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, A. W. Hoy, & W. K. Hoy, 1998). More specifically, Stronge et al. (2008) argued the principal's role is an important catalyst for "high quality instructional progress and, ultimately, enhancing student achievement" (p. 139). Moreover, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) contended that schools cannot succeed without a principal who is focused on student achievement. In addition to meeting all of the challenges of running schools,

principals are most effective when their efforts promote student learning (Fullan, 2003; W. K. Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

Effective principals understand it is vital to balance both meeting the needs of under-achieving students and supporting and promoting the academic outcomes of high-ability learners. VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2006) argued that it is the principal who must be the advocate for gifted students by promoting appropriate interventions. Therefore, it is important to understand principals' knowledge and perceptions about whole-grade acceleration because, as Zimmerman (2011) pointed out, some leaders may have had personal experiences that cause them to be "overly cautious and appearing indecisive or resistant to taking action when necessary" (p. 109). She concluded that principals should be self-aware enough to perceive any biases that would affect their decision-making.

In their study, Lewis et al. (2007) reported that high-ability students continue to be underserved in schools. They noted, "In these standards-driven times, it is a strong and forward-looking principal who recognizes that all students need to learn something new each day" (p. 57). Therefore, they set out to interview two highly-respected elementary administrators known to be supportive of gifted education. Their findings, however, painted a picture of little grade acceleration and the principals worried about the perception of elitism. Finally, while known statewide as advocates for gifted students, the participants in this study did not apply the same leadership characteristics with gifted education as the general education setting—data disaggregation, faculty team discussions, gathering input from personnel, and so forth. In fact, the principals did not

know if goals had been met related to gifted programming because those goals were not embedded in school improvement plans.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Grade Acceleration

Since its mid-19th-century introduction, acceleration has fallen in and out of favor in this country. Its detractors argue that it is “undemocratic, promoting snobbery in an accelerated elite and a sense of inferiority in those who are left behind” (J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1984, p. 84). So, while previous studies regarding the outcomes of acceleration have been markedly favorable, the perceptions of teachers and administrators may be decidedly negative (Rogers & Kimpston, 1992). The authors argued that school personnel should set aside unfounded concerns about acceleration so that “With careful attention to the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of prospective accelerated students, teachers and administrators can recommend acceleration with the confidence that the child will not only survive but will thrive in a more challenging learning environment” (p. 61).

School Personnel Perspectives on Acceleration

School personnel tend to be reluctant to consider grade acceleration due to concerns regarding possible long-term negative effects related to both academic and social-emotional outcomes (Siegle, Wilson, & Little, 2013). In most cases, if not all, if one asked a teacher to describe her thoughts about grade acceleration as a strategy for gifted students, the response would be negative (Hargrove, 2012). Teachers may be pessimistic about a student’s social and emotional maturity and may misunderstand that a precocious student may be “misbehaving” due to dissatisfaction with instruction and not due to immaturity (Feldhusen et al., 2002). In fact, the authors contended that not only

are teachers, principals, and superintendents reluctant to use whole-grade acceleration, parents may resist due to imagined negative social consequences.

While school personnel express worry about grade skipping, they should be equally concerned about the social and emotional dangers that may arise if gifted students are held back from acceleration (Feldhusen et al., 2002; Gallagher, Smith, & Merrotsy, 2011). Accelerants tend to outperform their non-accelerated peers academically and, at worst, show similar levels of social-emotional adjustment (Assouline, Colangelo, & Lupkowski-Shoplik, et al., 2003; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1992; Sayler & Brookshire, 1993; Southern & Jones, 1991). In other words, there is no evidence that grade acceleration has a negative influence on a student's social or emotional development.

Daurio (1979) stated that educators expressed a “disproportionate amount of caution” and used “selective bias” in interpreting the research. This resistance may be due to “preconceived notions and irrational grounds rather than to an examination of the evidence” (Swiatek & Benbow, 1991, p. 528). However, Southern et al. (1989) found that educators who had personal or professional experiences with grade acceleration tended to be more accepting of acceleration than those without first-hand experience with this strategy.

In a recent study of educators' attitudes about grade skipping, Siegle et al. (2013) found that teachers overwhelmingly agreed that acceleration would not lower self-esteem. However, they expressed concern over the emotional well-being of accelerants and a few thought these students were not happy with their lives. The authors indicated that it is unknown whether it was teachers' general lack of familiarity with gifted

students' emotional development in general, or with accelerated students specifically. In the same study, the authors elicited teachers' perceptions of the accelerants' peer relations. Most believed these students would have little difficulty in making friends. However, over half of the respondents believed these students were not socially well-adjusted. In fact, "The more an educator opposed grade-skipping, the more the educator felt grade-skipped students would suffer socially, would be unable to relate to new classmates, and would miss old friends" (Siegle et al., 2013, p. 43).

Principal Perspectives on Acceleration

It is important to consider the attitudes and perceptions of principals regarding the use of whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for high-ability learners. While the research is overwhelmingly positive, resistance and reluctance are the overarching hindrances to whole-grade acceleration being used in practice. Southern and Jones (2015) argued that resistance by administrators and teachers may discourage acceleration "by employing alarmist rhetoric about consequences or even denying that it is possible or legal to accelerate students" (p. 14). Vialle et al. (2001) summed up their research findings by noting that while studies continue to support the positive effects of acceleration on students, ongoing resistance exists in practice. In fact, the authors wrote that the main attitude of administrators is "early ripe, early rot," thereby indefatigably resisting grade skipping. They suggested that professional development on acceleration might encourage principals to change not only their beliefs, but also school-wide practice.

The idea of resistance is often summed up in principals' concern over the social and emotional welfare of students who grade skip (Colangelo et al., 2004; Southern et al., 1989). One study examined principals in Florida and their perspectives on acceleration

(Guilbault, 2009). Guilbault found that the administrators' reluctance was due to worry about the social and emotional development of students. Interestingly, the researcher found no correlation between administrators' background knowledge of gifted education and the use of acceleration. However, Vialle et al. (2001) suggested that training in gifted education may increase the consideration and use of whole-grade acceleration. What remains, though, is a pattern of administrator reluctance due to concerns about harm to students socially and emotionally.

Counselor Perspectives on Acceleration

In a national survey of 149 school counselors, Wood, Portman, Cigrand, and Colangelo (2010) observed that although counselors are being consulted and involved in decision-making, they possess little training in or background knowledge of acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students. Research findings revealed a lack of awareness of the frequency of students being accelerated, if at all, or even whether or not a district policy existed. In fact, 53% of the respondents indicated their discomfort in making recommendations regarding grade acceleration. Counselors concluded,

Acceleration via grade skipping would require removal of the student from the peer group, making it a public event and a greater educational departure from the 'norm'. In addition, if the grade skipping was not successful, there would be no subtle way to return the student to his original grade. Hence, these forms of acceleration could be considered by counselors as more radical (and subsequently considered less benign) and having a more negative impact on social and emotional adjustment. (Wood et al., 2010, p. 174)

Student Perspectives on Acceleration

After reviewing 50 years of data, Rogers (2002) conducted a meta-analytic review of the research. She found that accelerated students were more likely to make friends. Longitudinal studies of accelerated students self-reported high levels of self-esteem, self-concept, and psychosocial development (Richardson & Benbow, 1990; Swiatek & Benbow, 1991). In a study of perceptions regarding the impact of challenging curriculum combined with intentional social and affective development, students reported positive gains (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, Rogers, & McCormick, 2010). The authors suggested that when school personnel instituted formalized social and emotional supports, gifted students gained academically and affectively. Students reported positive benefits to acceleration. Heinbokel (2002) described how students who had grade skipped claimed they had no difficulty in catching up with the material; instead, they articulated how pleased they were to go at their pace and “for the first time in their lives they may go at full speed, learning seems worthwhile. Some children said that the time just after grade skipping was the time they liked best in school” (p. 170).

Limitations of Whole-grade Acceleration

Morelick and Feldman (2003) stressed that when considering grade acceleration, it is important to remember possible asynchronous development in younger students. Although they may easily handle the academic workload, some may struggle with the length of the school day or with issues of immaturity. In fact, concern for students’ immaturity is one reason school personnel cite for not encouraging grade skipping. In a long-term study of accelerants, Richardson and Benbow (1990) found that grade acceleration related negatively to self-esteem and self-concept when students make social

comparisons with their older-aged peers. In addition, a research study on high school students who were grade skipped discovered that they were less likely to be considered the most liked students and more likely to be ranked among the least popular (Siegle et al., 2013).

“Hothousing” describes the pressure placed on young children to assimilate knowledge and skills at an earlier age than is typical (Sigel, 1987). According to Katz (1987), when educational reform is applied to primary school and downward, acceleration may unduly push children. Elkind (1988) and Sigel (1987) both suggested that accelerating young children forces them to rely on rote memorization, impedes learning, and damages their self-esteem and confidence. However, in the late 1980s, Sisk argued that acceleration may be the one practice that most directly guards against underachievement and boredom (as cited in Rogers & Kimpston, 1992). In response, Elkind (1988) disagreed with the term “acceleration” and indicated it could lead to social problems if adults attempted to speed up a child’s development. Further, Minuchin (1987) stressed it is short-sighted to trade “human complexity” and creativity for accelerated academic learning in early childhood.

Summary

Principals who are instructional leaders in their schools support student achievement and student learning. Unfortunately, increasing demands on administrators may mean that schools are not always a place where each and every student, especially a gifted student, gets the exact intervention needed (Lewis et al., 2007). Whole-grade acceleration, or grade skipping, is a way for students to progress through the curriculum

at rates faster than their age peers and is supported by over 80 years of research on the topic.

Many studies have yielded strong evidence of the positive effects of acceleration on students academically, socially, and emotionally (Kulik, 2004; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1992; Rogers, 2004, 2015; Vialle et al., 2001). However, policies and practices often hinder the use of acceleration as an educational intervention. In addition, school-based personnel are often reluctant to consider grade skipping due to a largely unfounded fear of social or emotional harm.

In the 2004 landmark publication *A Nation Deceived* (Colangelo et al., 2004) reported on the use of accelerative options in schools. More than a decade later, *A Nation Empowered* (Assouline et al., 2015) reviewed current uses of the now more than 20 options for acceleration. The publication reported on the research studies of 33 experts in the field of gifted education and acceleration. The authors discussed the uses of accelerative options in meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of gifted students.

Principals who are effective instructional leaders can positively influence all school personnel to work together to make appropriate educational interventions for all students, including gifted learners. Moreover, student achievement is ensured when principals are engaged in the teaching and learning process (Fullan, 2003; W. K. Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; Murphy et al., 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

Human capital theorists postulate that by investing in education, job training, and health care, individuals' human capital can be increased resulting in improved career

outcomes, income, and improved quality of life (Becker, 2008). In addition, education provides the knowledge and skills through school experiences to prepare students for future employment (Loomis & Rodriguez, 2009).

CHAPTER 3

Research Methods

Chapter 3 details the methodology for this study that examined the relationships between elementary principals' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration. The chapter includes an overview of the rationale for the research design. In addition, a description of the pilot study is included to understand better the context for continuing to investigate this topic. The population and sample are described as well as the instrumentation chosen for the study. The chapter outlines data collection and data analysis methods. Finally, issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations are addressed.

Summary of the Project

The purpose of the study was to explore the relationships between elementary principals' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration and whether they consider it as an educational intervention for gifted students. The researcher investigated any previous personal and professional experiences they may have had related to grade skipping. Any prior training in gifted education that may influence whether administrators consider academic option were also examined. This study used an interview protocol to learn about elementary principals' philosophies on acceleration.

This study developed out of a profound and personal interest in acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students. I knew from experience that school

personnel tend to be unwilling to consider grade acceleration, even as the body of research studies has demonstrated positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students. However, there are few studies in the literature that explore the correlation between principals' perceptions and knowledge of acceleration and whether it is used as an academic option for gifted students. This study considered predictive factors such as background experiences and demographics.

This research study was important to me because I strive to inform practice to help principals' awareness of whole-grade acceleration as an academic intervention for high-ability learners. My hope is that, as has been the case with *A Nation Empowered*, this study will contribute to the ongoing conversation about the benefits of acceleration. From my earlier pilot study on this topic, one principal reflected, "Now that we've had this conversation, I'm just wondering if [acceleration is] something, that, as an administrator, it is my role to propose. Are there students who are being denied opportunities that they should have that I'm overlooking?"

Context

This study took place in a medium-sized suburban school district in southeastern Virginia. The school district serves over 11,000 students in nine elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools. For this study, all nine of the elementary principals participated, providing a rich case study. This allowed the researcher to investigate the varying demographics of the school district and of the principals themselves. Whole-grade acceleration is not a popular or often employed intervention in this district. Subject-based acceleration is similarly underutilized, with the possible exception of mathematics. As the gifted coordinator, I have been working with senior

leadership to update and modify both the policy and the procedures, as well as to provide professional development to stakeholders on accelerative options.

The district has a joint policy of acceleration and retention that was last revised in 2001. According to the policy, the building principal convenes a committee and determines student placement, whether for retention or acceleration. Over the past decade, eligibility guidelines have been utilized disproportionately more frequently in cases of retention rather than acceleration.

My earlier pilot study in this district revealed that, according to the interview participants, there had been only two known referrals for grade acceleration over the course of eight years. For example, in one school over three years there were 12 referrals for retention compared with zero for acceleration. One principal referred to acceleration as “something conveniently not even thought of.” Results from the study affirmed this infrequent use of whole-grade acceleration.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study were:

1. What background knowledge do elementary school principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
2. What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
3. What training in gifted education do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
4. What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

5. What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the challenges/liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

Research Design

I used an exploratory case study design to investigate elementary principals' knowledge, experiences, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration and prior training in gifted education. Case study may be the best type of research design when the researcher seeks to understand a real-world scenario that is bounded in time with a certain phenomenon (Yin, 2014; Yin & Davis, 2007). In addition, Creswell (2014) noted that case study research is an effective way to develop an in-depth analysis of both a process and individuals because it allows the researcher to explore those interrelationships (Yin, 2003, 2014). The case consisted of this one school district with nine embedded case studies that explored a variety of phenomena.

Case study research design afforded the researcher the opportunity to collect comprehensive information on a topic of interest to her (Patton, 2002). Baxter and Jack (2008) explained that an advantage of case study research is that participants are able to "share their stories" (p. 545). This research design also helped me to answer "how" and "why" types of questions (Yin, 2003, 2014). More specifically, an exploratory type of case study was used since the intervention being investigated had no clear outcome (Yin, 2003).

This research approach utilized specific strategies in order to collect information for data analysis and interpretation. The researcher used an interview protocol with open-ended questions in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, field notes, audio-recorded data, and themes and patterns interpretation (Creswell, 2014). Demographic information

was collected about each participant to provide additional context for the study. The standardized interview protocol and field notes, as supported by the audio-recorded data, were used to gain insight into the experiences of nine elementary principals in a medium-sized suburban school district in southeastern Virginia. The data collected were then used to perform a cross-case analysis to look for patterns across the interview participants (Glesne, 2006).

Participants

In this case study, one medium-sized suburban school district in southeastern Virginia was studied. This historically high-achieving district has nine elementary schools, three middle schools, three high schools, and over 11,000 students. In terms of ethnicity, the school district is approximately 11% Hispanic, 17% African-American, and over 60% White. For this study of elementary principals' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs regarding whole-grade acceleration, all nine elementary school principals participated. The sample is convenient, purposeful, and stratified. The sample is convenient because the researcher had direct access to the participants, all of whom work in the same school district. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative studies and is comprised of the selection of individuals or groups of individuals who are specifically included to help answer research study questions (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Moreover, Maxwell (1997) defined purposeful sampling strategically whereby "particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 87). The sample reflected a variety of schools in terms of student enrollment size, demographics, and accreditation levels. In addition, the principals ranged from first-year elementary school administrators

to veteran principals with extensive experience as building administrators. Finally, the sample size was stratified because it represented all of the available population from the school district (Creswell, 2014).

Instrumentation

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study to consider the viability of the research questions and to practice conducting interviews exploring elementary principals' perceptions of whole-grade acceleration. The study began with a research project précis that outlined the purpose of the study, research questions, a detailed plan of action, anticipated outcomes, and a brief review of the literature. An interview protocol was developed and utilized to learn about the background knowledge principals had related to grade skipping. The interview questions were different than the study's research questions, but were "derived from them to keep the study grounded" (Saldana, 2011, p. 35). In addition, the author suggested that the questions be "inference laden" in order to elicit responses about the perceptions and perspectives of the participants.

Once the interview protocol was developed, it was sent to a committee for review. The committee was made up of two university professors, one current principal, and a district level testing coordinator who had experience as an assistant principal. After checking and re-checking, the protocol was finalized. Subsequently, it was modified when, after the first interview session, the researcher found the question responses had not fully provided adequate data for analysis.

In case study research, many strategies are needed to obtain the clearest understanding of the case (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, three semi-structured face-to-face

interviews were conducted using the protocol. Field notes were also taken in order for the researcher to capture those biases and opinions she brought to the interview setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal was to elicit as much information as possible about principals' knowledge of acceleration as an academic option for high-ability learners.

The pilot study was a somewhat limiting investigation. Clandin and Connelly (2004) noted that researchers think about a topic in ever-expanding ways. The three participants were caring, well-meaning, and committed administrators, yet those qualities were not sufficient to mitigate their lack of knowledge or training related to whole-grade acceleration. As a result, I learned that additional studies were needed to understand why there are so few referrals for acceleration in this district. I was eager to build on the pilot and explore additional reasons or variables that would expand the scope of the investigation into grade skipping.

Modified Interview Protocol

For this study, the researcher provided a modified interview protocol (see Appendix A) to the committee for input. The interview protocol was used to record information from the volunteer participants. This protocol allowed the researcher to use a predetermined list of questions to elicit responses regarding their knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs of whole-grade acceleration (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013, 2014) also argued that both the standardization of the protocol and the open-ended questions allowed for responses that encouraged open discussion, thereby increasing the reliability of the research study. The goal was to obtain detailed demographic and background educational information about the principals. The protocol also included sufficient questions to elicit their knowledge about acceleration. See Appendix B for the interview

protocol Table of Specifications. The researcher conducted nine face-to-face semi-structured interviews using the protocol modified for this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The school district functioned as the case study comprised of nine separate cases creating a collective case study (Glesne, 2006). After receiving Internal Review Board (IRB) approval from the university, a similar process was completed for the study school district. In addition, the researcher contacted the nine elementary principals to explain the study and request their volunteer participation. Prior to each face-to-face interview, principals signed a consent to participate form (see Appendix C). Rapport was easily established and each audio-recorded interview lasted approximately one hour.

Pseudonyms and random gender assignment assisted in the confidentiality of participants in the study. Each interview occurred at a time of the principal's convenience to ensure their comfort and focused attention during the interview.

Specific research methods were utilized in order to provide information for data analysis and interpretation. Maxwell (2013) noted that in case study research, many strategies are needed to obtain the clearest understanding of the case. The researcher used an interview protocol with open-ended questions in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, field notes, audio-recorded data, and themes and patterns interpretation (Creswell, 2014).

The audio-recorded data supported the field notes and transcripts by providing a context of the nuances of participant speech patterns and language choice. Interview transcripts from the participating nine principals were analyzed independently, but also as a collective case study, whereby the researcher was able to conduct a cross-case analysis

to look for patterns across cases (Glesne, 2006; Yin, 2014). The cross-case analysis was used to identify commonalities and differences among the participants. Stake (2000) maintained that in collective case study it is important to consider both variety and redundancy which can lead to better understanding.

The interviews were recorded using Voice Record Pro 7 and subsequently submitted to a service for transcription. The researcher carefully considered the principal transcripts. Oliver, Serovich, and Mason (2005) argued that although interview transcription is a “behind the scenes task, we suggest that transcription is a powerful act of representation” (p. 1273). As a result, denaturalized transcripts were requested to better represent the participants’ intended meanings. Denaturalism is a selective choice where filler words and “idiosyncratic elements of speech” are removed (Oliver et al., 2005, p. 1273). The researcher was interested in the substance of what principals had to say without the possible distraction of unintended utterances.

A transcript was made available to each participant for member checking to ensure that it reflected what was said during the interview. The principals were given the opportunity to ask questions or make clarifying remarks. However, no participants provided feedback to the researcher. Accordingly, the transcripts were then reviewed in multiple ways. Saldana (2011) cautioned researchers not to take the

obvious for granted; sometimes the expected won’t always happen; your hunches can be quite right and, at other times, quite wrong; examine the evidence carefully and make reasonable inferences; and logically yet imaginatively think about what’s going on and how it all comes together. (p. 94)

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participant responses were reviewed many times in order to try to answer the study's research questions. Initially, each interview transcript was read independently several times using an ocular scan and pawing of the text (Bernard, 2011). An ocular scan allowed the researcher to begin to look for themes and patterns while "pawing the text" was used to highlight and color-code the text (Bernard, 2011). Alhojailan (2012) maintained that reading transcripts several times before and after themes and codes emerge affords the researcher the opportunity to get a full picture and make connections between interviewees' thoughts and ideas and other data collected. Codes were then developed in order to aggregate text (Maxwell, 2013), and this process was repeated several times with the expectation that certain themes and subthemes would emerge. Once each case had been reviewed, the researcher conducted a cross-case analysis to look for interrelationships among the nine cases to identify additional themes and patterns (Glesne, 2006).

The analysis began with a detailed description of the study participants that provided a setting for the emergence of overarching themes and possible issues (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 1995). Adapting a technique from Creswell (2014), the researcher took the following analytic steps: 1) organized all of the data points, including interview transcripts and field notes; 2) reflected on the initial collected data; 3) coded the data by hand; 4) provided a description of the themes; and, finally 5) interpreted the meaning of the themes. Furthermore, it was essential to remember that the data analysis was intended to inform decision-making practices relevant to acceleration. Findings from the research provided important implications for practice and policy development,

something vital to continuing a national conversation about the barriers to whole-grade acceleration being considered as an academic option for gifted students.

Codes were developed in order to aggregate text (Maxwell, 2013) and this process was repeated several times with the expectation that certain themes and subthemes would emerge. Saldana (2011) explained that theming of the data is a process of moving from the coding of transcripts, words or short phrases, to themes that summarize both the manifest (apparent) and latent (underlying) meanings of data. In fact, Saldana (2013) wrote, “Qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience” (p. 10).

In addition to this inductive coding, I also categorized the codes into the following:

1. What supports my research questions?
2. What information was unexpected?
3. What information is conceptually interesting or unusual to researchers?

I color-coded each transcript and then cut and sorted excerpts to include as support for my research findings. Chapter 4 will elucidate these findings related to elementary principals’ knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration for gifted students.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

There are several potential limitations to this study. The first is that the principals who were interviewed may not have much personal or professional experience with the use of whole-grade acceleration. In addition, the interviews relied on the participants’ willingness to share details from personal and professional experience. In fact,

administrators' personal and professional experiences and training were not known prior to the interviews because there was no pre-interview meeting to elicit these data. This could limit the validity of the findings.

The primary delimitation of this study was the choice to include only elementary principals from one district in southeastern Virginia. By choosing to interview just elementary principals, and not other stakeholders with decision-making responsibilities related to the practice of whole-grade acceleration, I was only able to report from the perspective of one group of decision makers.

Issues of Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that in qualitative design, credibility and trustworthiness are important constructs to consider during the data analysis phase. In addition, the conclusions that are reached will be “just right to persuade the reader that we have conducted our jobs soundly” (Saldana, 2011, p. 135). A great degree of effort was invested to produce a research study that reflects the highest quality of honesty, integrity, and truthful findings. The researcher invested the appropriate amount of time and effort with each interview participant and applied appropriate analytic methods.

Summary

This study investigated one medium-sized suburban school district in southeastern Virginia. It consisted of nine embedded cases of all of its elementary school principals to examine their knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration. They participated in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Data were collected on their demographic and background information as well as prior personal and professional experiences related to acceleration. Findings from this study will be used to add to the

body of literature related to the use of whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students. In addition, findings from the study will be available to inform school personnel in making decisions about the use of acceleration.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

Background

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to investigate one district's nine elementary principals' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs related to whole-grade acceleration. The researcher conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and maintained field notes for each participant. In addition, other evidence was collected on the policies, practices, and demographics of the school district. Once each case was analyzed, a cross-case analysis was conducted to explore themes or patterns across cases (Glesne, 2006).

Each of the nine principals provided demographic information, including educational background. In addition to each having received bachelor's degrees, they also hold a combined 12 master's degrees, and two are currently enrolled in doctoral programs. Eight principals have a master's degree in educational leadership and four have or are participating in a consortium of administrators enrolled in a principal's academy affiliated with a local university. See Table 1 for demographic information.

It is very important to note that research question 3, which addressed the training participants have related to whole-grade acceleration yielded zero results, unfortunately. No principal had received training about acceleration themselves, nor had researched or studied the option for their administrative team. This was unexpected and likely influenced the overall findings. On the other hand, all principals had both received and

provided training on retention. So, study participants have received some degree of professional development in gifted education but none had attended or provided any training about whole-grade acceleration.

Table 1 represents the demographic information about the nine study participants. Pre-interview questions were asked to collect their levels of educational attainment as well as experiences as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Each participant was assigned a random pseudonym. In addition, the gender of the principals was randomized to provide additional confidentiality.

Table 1

Demographic Distribution of Elementary Principals

Principal Name	Specialization and/or Certifications	Subjects Taught	Grade Levels	# Years Teaching	# Years Assistant Principal	# Years Principal
Ms. Carter	Curriculum & Instruction; Special Education; Educational Leadership	Math, science, social studies	4-6	20	6	1
Mr. James	Health/PE; School Counseling; Educational Leadership; Superintendent's License	Biology, health/PE	All levels	7	1	5
Ms. Adkins	Educational Leadership	English	6-8	3	3	5
Mr. Roberts	Health/PE; Educational Leadership	Special education, health/PE	All levels	13	3	9
Mr. Allen	Educational Leadership	English, math, science, social studies	3	10	2	20
Mrs. Carson	Health/PE; Biology; Educational Leadership	Health/PE, science	6-8	25	6	7
Mr. Vincent	Teaching and Elementary Education; Educational Leadership	English, math, science, social studies	2-3	8	2	2
Mrs. Cole	K-12 Administration, Reading, Language, and Literacy	English, math, science, social studies	2-3	15	2	4
Mrs. Hunter	Educational Leadership	Science	8	11	3	2

All study participants had teaching experience ranging from 3-25 years. Six of the nine principals had 10 or more years in the classroom. Two had taught at all three levels—elementary, middle, and high; three only had experience at the elementary level; and, interestingly, four only taught in middle schools before becoming elementary administrators. In addition to teaching all four core subjects, three participants had experience teaching health and physical education; two taught special education students; and one served as a school counselor.

After leaving the classroom, seven principals spent three or fewer years as an assistant principal and two each served six years in that administrative role. Interestingly, only one participant had principal experience in a different school district. The most experienced participant has 20 years as a principal in two elementary schools in the study district.

Pre-interview questions included those that explored any gifted coursework or training they had, as well as any professional development related to gifted education they had arranged for staff. Two principals had some coursework in gifted education during undergraduate studies; one of which was gifted studies as part of an umbrella course that included special populations. Seven principals noted they had participated in training in gifted education provided by the school district, but nothing related to whole-grade acceleration. Six participants reported they had arranged for professional development in gifted for their staff. Many have worked with the Coordinator of Gifted Education to provide a variety of training modules and two principals tasked their building's gifted resource teacher to provide updates on gifted services.

Case Study – Principal #1

Principal #1, Ms. Valerie Carter, is a first-year elementary principal. She holds a bachelor's degree in business administration and master's degrees in both curriculum and instruction (emphasis in special education) and educational leadership. As far as gifted education training, she had no any coursework and very little professional development. As a classroom teacher in grades 4-6 for 20 years, Ms. Carter taught math, science, and social studies in inclusion settings. At one school, she had the opportunity to have a cluster of both gifted and special education students. She found the experience to be unique and "Working with the gifted kids, it was a challenging environment for me at first because I had to develop a curriculum for math that would challenge them, and then projects in history and science that would extend their learning."

Ms. Carter was an assistant principal at a middle school in the study district before receiving this principal position at an elementary school. Her school is a Title 1 school with just over 600 students in pre-K-5. The student enrollment is 60% White, 30% African American, 10% other ethnicities. It has a dramatically increasing English language learners (ELL) population of 12%. She was unaware that the percentage of identified gifted students is 12%.

I arrived early for our appointment so I had an opportunity to sit in the main office and observe Ms. Carter interact with students and staff. She was energetic, supportive, interested, engaged, and enthusiastic with everyone she encountered. Her rapport with students was special because the three students I saw were there for disciplinary reasons; yet, she was encouraging with them. When we sat down in her office for the interview, she expressed an interest in whole-grade acceleration even though she admitted she knew

little about the topic. She has not yet arranged for any staff training in gifted education but pointed out, “But that is something I would consider in the future.” While she has had some experience as a teacher with students who skip a grade, she knows of no referrals in the last three years as an administrator.

Research question #1: What background knowledge do elementary principals have related to whole-grade acceleration?

Ms. Carter again admitted she has not had much experience with whole-grade acceleration and, when asked about a district policy, responded, “I do not know if there is a policy.” She was fairly certain guidelines existed but, as an administrator, has not had the opportunity to “promote a kid for acceleration.”

I asked Ms. Carter what stands out in her mind when she thinks of whole-grade acceleration. She shared,

Probably just the opposition from some of the teachers, I would think. The teachers, when they inherit a student that’s been whole-grade accelerated, I think they’re automatically defensive because they’re thinking how am I going to meet this kid’s needs because he must be a bright kid.

When prompted if there was anything else she could think of said, “No. Just the kid himself, just making sure that he feels comfortable.” She continued,

Actually, I haven’t done a whole lot of research on it, so I don’t know the long-term outcomes or impacts of whole-grade acceleration, although I am interested. Would find it fascinating to find out the research studies that have been done on it. That’s interesting.

Finally,

Haven't looked at the research. But from my individual perspective on a limited basis, those two kids [accelerants], I saw what it did for them. I'm very in favor of it. I'd probably promote whole-grade acceleration over meeting the kid's needs at the grade level, trying to expand and trying to differentiate at that grade level. So I'd probably look at whole-grade acceleration before I'd do the differentiation at the grade level he's at. But of course that's not based on research. That's based on my opinion and based on my frame of reference.

As the interview continued, I changed the protocol to inquire about her knowledge of retention and I wondered if that might influence her beliefs or perceptions about whole-grade acceleration. Ms. Carter said she was very familiar with the research on retention. She shared, "It generally says that most kids that are retained at least one time, of those kids, a high percentage go on to not graduate high school."

Research question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have related to whole-grade acceleration?

I asked Ms. Carter about both her personal and professional experiences with whole-grade acceleration. As an administrator, she has had no requests for students to skip a grade. She reflected,

I'm vaguely familiar with it [whole-grade acceleration], so don't have a lot of experience with it. Probably I could say the one single experience that I've had was a kid that I've actually taught myself, and that was many years ago. . . And then another student did the same thing, skipped over an entire year. So two cases that I've actually had personally. With that said, both of them went on to be

extremely successful. I know that one of them went to [Division 1 school] and the other went to an Ivy League school.

From a personal level, Ms. Carter laughed when I asked if she had any family experience with grade skipping. She said,

Nothing that's in my family. I've had one son that was just right out of the gifted threshold. He was kind of that 125 [IQ] kid that just made the threshold and wasn't really considered gifted. He did well at high school, took a lot of AP classes with the other accelerated kids. Went on to major in engineering in college and did fine. But my personal experience, I haven't had any at home with me that's been mildly accelerated.

With so few experiences with grade skipping, and none as an administrator, my questions changed to allow Ms. Carter to consider possible outcomes. She thought about the two students who skipped a grade when she was a classroom teacher. When asked about academic outcomes, she remembered,

I'll just make a generic collective frame of reference. Both boys were very successful in transitioning from third to fifth. Went on to be very successful and take high level AP classes in high school. One was a successful swimmer. So, when he went on to the collegiate level, he chose to go to [Division 1 school] for obviously a swimming scholarship. He was very successful academically. The other one was strictly academics and went on to an Ivy League school and graduated. So a very successful student. Majored in engineering.

Socially, Ms. Carter had an interesting perspective,

In these cases, these are individual cases, both boys were taller and more mature than their average peer. So the outcomes socially and emotionally were fine, absolutely. They thrived in their environment. . . Now one I have to tell you, the father of one of these boys was a college professor so he had kind of an academic background as well.

I asked if she thought that made a difference and she responded, “Absolutely I do. He came from a background where he had been exposed to higher academics, was very mature by his approach to it, and just a well-rounded young man that was not intimidated by acceleration at all.” I asked about emotional outcomes for these students. She answered,

Emotionally, both boys—I can only speak for the very short time I worked with them. I’ve kept in touch with their families every once in a while. Both boys seem to be doing very, very well. I don’t think it impacted them in the least as far as emotionally. They were able to establish friendships. They had a peer group. And so they felt at home.

In my field notes, I highlighted her comment about “impacted” as though she still might have the mindset that acceleration could be detrimental to a student.

Research question #4: What do elementary principals consider (perceive) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

I wanted to learn what Ms. Carter believed might be the possible benefits of whole-grade acceleration. I was surprised at her lengthy response in light of her admitted limited familiarity with the intervention. She paused and then said,

Meeting his academic needs. If this kid is gifted but on the other end of maturity, if he's a very mature boy for his age and he's around peers that he considered equal with him and that'll meet his social, intellectual needs as far as conversation, as far as stimulation that he needs. I'd like to think that whole-grade acceleration gets them one step closer to going to college earlier and achieving his lifelong goals. . . So I think the whole-grade acceleration is a better avenue for achieving the academic stimulation that child desires.

It seemed that by keeping track of these two students over time positively impacted her perceptions of whole-grade acceleration.

Research question #5: What do elementary principals consider (perceive) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

I wondered what a principal would consider to be a liability for a student who skips a grade. She concluded,

Concerns. Again, we'll go back to that individual child. If the child is whole-grade accelerated, he's in there with much older, much wiser peers. Although he's very intelligent, emotionally he may be somewhat immature. So I'm worried about him emotionally getting picked on, targeted. He's younger, smaller. I'm worried about people saying stuff to him that'll impact his long-term emotional stability. So mostly the physical safety of the child.

During this part of the interview, I noted that this belief might have been influenced by her extensive middle school experience, both as a teacher and an administrator.

However, I do not think that her limited knowledge of whole-grade acceleration was influenced by her middle school experience. I also thought it interesting that she had

positive reflections on two students who grade skipped, yet in considering liabilities, she fell back on a myth.

Summary of case study – principal #1. As a first-year elementary principal, Ms. Carter acknowledged her focus tends to be on low achieving students and the remediation they need. However, she expressed a genuine interest in learning about whole-grade acceleration and what the research literature reveals. While she may have been somewhat cautious about grade skipping, Ms. Carter was willing to consider it over just using differentiation.

Ms. Carter's background was almost exclusively teaching in an inclusion setting with special education students. That may also be a reason for her focus as a principal on lower performing students. This was an enjoyable interview because, while she knew little about this topic, she eagerly engaged in the questions and wanted to know more. Because Principal #1 has been in public education for 26 years, with six as a middle school assistant principal, it did not appear that being a first-year elementary principal factored into her limited knowledge of whole-grade acceleration. As a teacher she had experience with two students skipping a grade and had first-hand knowledge of some of the academic and psychosocial outcomes that were positive.

Case Study – Principal #2

Principal #2, Mr. Tom James, has been a principal for five years, three in the study district. He has a bachelor's of arts in physical education and a master's degree in school counseling. Certified as a K-12 administrator, he also has his superintendent license and is currently completing an executive Ed.D. program in educational leadership. He has not had any coursework in gifted education but has participated in some training

provided by the school district. Mr. James taught at all three levels both biology and health and physical education before serving as a school counselor for four years. He was also a division director of testing before becoming an assistant principal for one year.

Mr. James' school has an enrollment of over 500 students and is majority White. Forty percent of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and it has minimal English language learners, Asian, and Hispanic populations. He did not know the percentage of identified gifted but said, "We're probably like 6%." The actual percent of identified gifted students is 14%.

Our second interview was scheduled for before school one morning because our first appointment had been scheduled for after school and there were too many conflicts. So, I arrived early and waited for our interview as Mr. James interacted with staff and teachers. He is compassionate, hard-working, driven, and dedicated to the success of students in his care. He is committed to supporting teachers and uses data to inform instruction. The interview began after he had a brief teacher conference.

Research question #1: What background knowledge do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

The interview protocol provided multiple questions to glean participants' knowledge of whole-grade acceleration. I began by asking Mr. James if he knew of any district policy or guidelines. He answered, "No, I don't know of anything." And yet, he was adamant about what process would need to be in place to consider this intervention. He continued,

You follow policy and guidelines; however, but it's not something that's hard to contend against a family or a parent about if you have the appropriate structures in

place to say yes or no to the reason why it should or shouldn't if it's best for the child. And I do believe that you have to have the social/emotional piece included on that checklist or that rubric that you use to justify your reasoning.

The reality of Mr. James' experiences was that whole-grade acceleration is an infrequent topic of conversation among colleagues, teachers, and parents. He admitted, I'll be honest, it doesn't come up much. It wasn't in my career. We talk about differentiation so much that unless it's a blaring thing to say wow, this student really could benefit from whole-grade acceleration, that's not our first go-to. So, because it doesn't happen as often, you don't hear much about it.

When any interview question targeted Mr. James' knowledge of whole-grade acceleration, answers centered around his caution for the appropriateness of the intervention socially and emotionally. He began,

Is it the right thing for kids? Not necessarily because it's a bad thing, but I really truly believe in that social, emotional, developmentally appropriate piece. I feel like you have to allow for some sort of time frame to allow for growth and for children to kind of level out before you make a huge decision.

He continued,

Yes, I think that socially and emotionally you have to consider whether or not this is a socially and emotionally developmentally appropriate decision to make. The thing that you have to consider is if this happens at the foundational grade levels how, will it impact them later in their academic career? All facets of their learning may not be there. And socially and emotionally their peers, it might not be best for them.

When asked about his personal feelings about grade skipping, Mr. James summed up his position, “It’s not something that you can just make a whim decision on. I don’t know that that would be my first go-to thing to do.”

While Mr. James’ body language reflected an uncertainty about his answers about whole-grade acceleration, he seemed much more confident when discussing retention. He said he had not reviewed any district guidelines about acceleration. In fact, he considered,

I’m gonna be honest. I don’t necessarily hear as much about whole-grade acceleration as I do retention. And that’s because I think the gaps in instruction that are evident in larger populations of our children present more of the priority or more of the sense of urgency. So the focus tends to be on that population versus children moving forward or whole-grade acceleration.

However, he shared that retention “doesn’t have a high effect size on student outcomes. I can tell you that.”

Research question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

One goal of the interview protocol was to understand principals’ professional and personal experiences related to whole-grade acceleration to determine what effect any experiences may have on decision-making practices. Mr. James had zero personal experiences. Prior to joining the student district, he said,

I’ve had that [professional experience with whole-grade acceleration], actually in this district and the district I worked in before. Sometimes it’s prompted by parents because they don’t feel like their children are being challenged enough

because maybe they're reading at a higher level than same-age peers. But again, I go back to that social, emotional, developmentally, and then are all phases of their academics supportive of needing an accelerated option? A lot of times the answer is 'no' because we can delve into skills that need to be broadened and strengthened more than what the service layers provided information on. Now I will tell you I have accelerated a student to first grade from kindergarten at my last school. And I supported it due to all of the pieces were there. The social, emotional, developmental. The child was of age. So it was definitely the right thing to do for her.

In this study district, he has had one conversation with a parent who was interested in pursuing acceleration. He remembered,

Yep, I had one this year. A parent asked me. Said that their child had done a modified kindergarten curriculum and therefore thought that maybe she would be good for first grade. Always, again, we consider it, but we look at the data. We look at the social and emotional pieces. If they align, it's definitely something we're willing to try. But in this case, it wasn't something that was going to be in the best interest of the child.

While Mr. James had limited experiences with students who skipped a grade, he was asked to share possible outcomes of students who skip a grade. Academically, he shared what he remembered about a student from a different district,

She soared [academically]. She was so successful. But I think it's because she was ready as well. That's a key point. She was developmentally above her peers in kindergarten and obviously academically because she had had exposure to

some kindergarten. And so she was ready for it. And she was in the top 5% of her class.

Again, in a different school district, he described the social outcomes of a different student,

Socially, it was appropriate. I have had an experience with a child who skipped from second to third. I got the results of it in fifth grade when I was his principal. I was his assistant principal in fourth. I have followed that child, although I am no longer in that division. And I'll say socially he struggles right now. He's in high school.

When I probed for more details, he continued,

He struggles with doing things with his same-aged peers versus his classmates. Developmentally, he thinks like his same-aged peers and he doesn't enjoy the things that his classmates do. It's that pivotal year that has provided him that division of I should be in eighth grade versus ninth, and I still like to do these things that now is no longer accepted as cool. I think it all depends on the child too. I go back to that individualized piece.

Principal James added that emotionally he was aware of mixed results. He concluded,

I think for the first one, I think emotionally so far so good. She's in third grade now and things are fine. She's a thriving little girl. For the male that I'm aware of, he is doing well. But I think that emotionally he presents himself to struggle with acceptance.

Principal #2 has had limited experience with students who skip a grade and his responses are a bit mixed in terms of outcomes.

Research question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

Similarly, considering benefits associated with using whole-grade acceleration, Mr. James continued to be somewhat cautious about the usage of the intervention. He said, “It shows that you’re willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that a child gets the support and the education that’s going to build them to their optimal success.” However, in continuing his commitment to the whole child, he maintained,

I’d consider it if it’s what’s best for the child. I don’t think that it’s something that every student can do for various reasons. But I do think that if it is something that’s best for a child, it should be something that’s considered.

Research question #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

On the other hand, Mr. James had more to share when asked about possible challenges or liabilities associated with whole-grade acceleration. He said,

Well, for me, I do worry about whether or not it’s going to be something that emotionally hinders the child in the future because of not feeling like they fit in or have the acceptance due to social pieces. So the acceptance and understanding of why that’s an option and why it’s for some and not for others. I think that that’s a challenge that you face.

He went on to explain what he meant,

Everybody wants what’s best for their own personal child. So when you think from a parent’s perspective, if this child is accelerating and my child isn’t, you have to be able to answer why on that. That is a challenge that you’ll face – well

that one can do it but why can't mind? It would be the same for a lot of things in a public school setting.

It appeared that Mr. James was most concerned about social and emotional challenges for students and the need for a defensible set of guidelines or procedures to make informed decisions when working with community stakeholders. This participant spoke in broad terms as if this intervention was a common practice and many families were clamoring for their child to be accelerated. This is not the case in the study district.

Summary of case study - principal #2. Mr. James is in his third year as a principal in the study district. He has varied teaching and counseling experiences that are reflected in his dedication to the whole child's well-being. He has not had coursework in gifted but has participated in the district's professional development offerings. The principal was unaware of a district policy on acceleration and shared it is not a frequently considered academic option.

He expressed caution about whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students but he is willing to consider it. Mr. James' limited experiences with acceleration seem to have had mixed results and likely influenced his beliefs and perceptions about its use moving forward. The concerns he expressed related most frequently to a student's social and emotional development. Secondary was an awareness that acceleration for one student might appear elitist and be a worry for other school community members.

Case Study – Principal #3

Principal #3, Ms. Renée Adkins, is in her third year as an elementary principal. Currently working on her doctoral degree in educational leadership, she holds a

bachelor's degree in English and secondary education and a master's in educational leadership and policy. As an undergraduate student, she completed a course with an emphasis on incorporating differentiation strategies in curriculum development. She taught middle school English for three years before going into administration.

Ms. Adkins served as an assistant principal for three years and a middle school principal for two and a half years before she became principal at her current elementary school. She shared that her gifted training as an administrator was comprised of professional development for both principals and staff. In her role as principal she has coordinated with the director of gifted education to provide varied training for her staff.

Ms. Adkins' school has just under 500 students with 50% eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and 40% non-White. She estimated that 10% of students were identified gifted when, in fact, it is actually 12%. Regarding the gifted enrollment she elaborated,

The numbers are low. We shot up this year. But looking at last year's numbers in comparison to where we are this year, our numbers have gone up. I think with our fifth grade, we've probably doubled in terms of our numbers. That's a positive; we want to move in that direction. But then also looking at our students under our [program for students with potential from traditionally underrepresented populations]. We want to build those numbers and grow that. She conveyed an interest in considering all interventions to identify or serve gifted students.

We were scheduled to meet later in the school day, so I arrived and was escorted to a conference room near her office. I was a bit surprised that she did not choose her

office, the place where I figured she would feel most comfortable. However, as the interview began, she was immediately at ease and thoughtfully considered and then answered each question. Ms. Adkins was very animated and enthusiastic discussing her educational background. Her mother was a career educator and Ms. Adkins seems to have embraced the same passion for her career in public education.

Research question #1: What background knowledge do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

The interview questions began with Ms. Adkins admitting, “I’m not familiar with any guidelines or policies for acceleration.” So, I asked her to talk about what she knows about whole-grade acceleration and she said,

I don’t know if I know a whole lot about whole-grade acceleration. I don’t feel like I’ve ever been exposed to a process or the dos and don’ts. I feel like I try to use screeners and benchmark assessments and normal assessments that we would use to be able to see if that student’s able to produce appropriate work at that grade level that’s looking to be skipped or looking to be passed over to get to the next one.

She shared her personal feelings about this option,

I’m not against it. I don’t know if I know enough about it to be able to sit in a debate and say these are all the reasons for it. But I’m certainly not against accelerating and giving students more opportunities if I see the need for a student to sit through something that they are proficient of have information with, if they can move forward and accelerate and grow.

She laughed as she considered what stands out to her about whole-grade acceleration.

She began, “Smarts!” then continued,

I mean I look at it from an area that there’s a student that’s engaged, there’s a student that has a hunger to learn, has an excitement about learning. And I worry about the student losing that zeal or that love. You want to be able to ignite that.

As a result of her commitment to all students, while she hesitated, she ultimately agreed that whole-grade acceleration is an option at her school but said, “I suppose. We don’t close it off.” Her reason was because,

Again, I don’t see the need to have redundancy of staying in a location where you are already proficient or where you already have those skills or that information.

I think that stifles the engagement, the excitement, the desire to want to learn. If we have a mission of developing critical thinkers, lifelong learner, I think we have to be able to make sure we’re opening that door for all opportunities.

I found Ms. Adkins to be very aware of the possible limitations in public education and her dedication to fighting the status quo if it means looking out for the interests of students. The reason she does, in fact, consider acceleration for gifted students was insightful. She reflected,

I’m trying to think of the best way to say this. I don’t feel like it’s something that’s advertised. So it would be interesting if the same way we put out information about “here’s our retention information, here we go,” we don’t do the same for acceleration. I don’t feel like that’s something that we necessarily put out there or advertise. So, it’s not off the table. But I think, again, when you look at the institution of education, we feel like there needs to be a structure, and they

need to go through this grade level to get to this grade level, and this is why standards are in place, and this is why we have objectives. And we need to make sure that they get all of these pieces. That's some validity to that, but again, I don't know if we are necessarily doing all we can to push a student to go beyond that piece.

This principal's responses reflected a conscious awareness to not rely solely on the lock step notion of public education, yet a bit cautious of using this intervention for gifted students due to limited knowledge of whole-grade acceleration.

So, while she mentioned retention in her response above, Ms. Adkins seemed somewhat disinclined to focus on the retention practices she obviously knew thoroughly. Previously, she had admitted that she was unfamiliar with the research on acceleration, so I asked about her knowledge about the research on retention. She again laughed and succinctly said, "Bad, bad, bad! Don't do it!" However, once I probed further, Ms. Adkins provided lengthy responses about procedures, guidelines, and processes on retention. This ended up being in stark contrast to her knowledge of those processes in place for whole-grade acceleration.

Research question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Admittedly, Ms. Adkins has had very little professional experiences with requests for acceleration and no known personal experiences. She recounted, "I've had one experience. The family provided quite a bit of data as far as the student's preschool experiences." The result of that request was,

We placed the student into first grade. I used the reading levels. We did some screeners and things of that nature and felt that it would be better to start the student at a higher grade than feeling like if we started them in kindergarten that we'd need to push up. It would be a whole lot easier to start at first grade and then need to scale back than vice versa. And the student has some challenges as far as just the maturity aspect, but was able to hold his own.

I was surprised at this opinion of starting a student in the next grade without going through a process that would provide objective data to consider the student as an excellent or good candidate for whole-grade acceleration (as is quantifiable in the Iowa Acceleration Scale tool). However, it is understandable that not knowing the research on acceleration that Ms. Adkins' body language reflected a desire to do the best to meet the needs of the whole child.

I asked about the process she went through and whether there were resources within the district to help assist in making a research best-practices decision. I noted immediately her reluctance to say anything negative about the situation. About receiving input from colleagues, she said, "Some help, yes." But whether any other principals had an in-depth knowledge of whole-grade acceleration, she said, "No. No more than me." After reaching out to central office personnel to little avail, she determinedly took action. She remembered,

I've tried to work through [central office] just to kinda get some guidance as far as making sure I'm not overstepping any bounds or crossing any guidelines or doing anything that I shouldn't be doing.

In addition, she shared,

I don't know if I necessarily felt like I got a lot of direction. So I considered what it looks like for child study when we make decisions for studies in a child study plan. We try to pull together our specialists and our experts to get a good read of where that student is so that it's not me making a single decision but that I have other people in the loop.

The lack of perceived support affected this principal's ability to provide a research best-practices method to making a placement decision for acceleration. Ms. Adkins' choices reflect that commitment to the students in her care.

I asked Ms. Adkins about student outcomes from this one case. Academically, she said,

They were at grade level. There were some challenges. I would say that maybe some of that was based off of social and just maturity and age development. But the student was certainly engaged and motivated, was willing to try. . . But I wouldn't say that the student was the top student within the classroom, but not the lowest.

She shared how the student's social skills developed through the year. She continued,

It progressed in a positive manner for the student. There were no behavior issues at all. He's a little guy that was social. So, I mean, you come in and it was like, "Hi, how are you today?" And wanting to share, wanting to chat. He held his own socially. But I really do think that there were areas in terms of if he didn't grasp or get a concept or a skill maybe being a little more reserved in terms of his actions with his peers.

Ms. Adkins indicated that part of his challenges was being a competitive little boy who was also shy at the beginning of the school year. Emotionally, she added, “Nothing that was brought to our attention.” She was eluding to any disciplinary situations with the student.

Research question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

Study participants were all asked to consider the benefits of whole-grade acceleration. While limited in scope, her responses were a direct reflection of her choice to not let the status quo of public education be an impediment to high ability learners receiving the interventions they need. She considered,

I think the whole concept of not placing people in a box but blowing that box up, I mean, when it comes to the idea of being innovative, creative opportunities—I mean those are some of the words that immediately come to mind. But when you allow students who have a vision, who have desire to explore things, to really be able to do that, some really awesome answers can come. And I think when we give kids that opportunity or people that opportunity to be able to really let loose and explore, sometimes we can come up with some really great answers.

She added, “If you can keep them enriched and engaged and feeling like they have a support system, those are things that just seem to stand out in some of the readings and experiences.”

Research question #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

Alternately, when Ms. Adkins was asked to mention possible challenges to whole-grade acceleration, she tended to provide more examples than benefits. She was very thoughtful and considered before answering,

I feel like sometimes you see more negative than positive in terms of grade skipping. And I think that's in looking at the long-term aspects for children. I'm trying to think about it from the angle of there was even a series talking about the new kindergarten and whether we're giving kindergarten students too much and not focusing enough on play or the opportunities to be a child. So, I don't know. Again, this wasn't in the last three years, but then reading about information and looking at some of my students at the middle school level who have accelerated and the stress or the pressure that they were placing on themselves, just that sense of belonging and what to do. And I think some of that also comes from if there's not a good process in place or if they're—if you don't have a village or support or a family that's even fully aware of the child that they're working with to be able to help the student progress.

Again, I was surprised by a participant who shared possible challenges without much experience with the intervention. It struck me during the interview that what she was saying was shared from a position of her perceptions and not knowledge of acceleration.

However, there was one professional experience that did have an impact on Ms. Adkins and she shared,

There's a student that stands out for me, and the student currently is in high school. But that student had a lot of social challenges. Was accelerated I don't know if it was one or two grades here in the division. I don't know how much of

it was family issues and things of that nature, but it was rough for that student.

Very intelligent in terms of book smarts, but the emotional grip of dealing with things was extremely hard.

This principal repeatedly championed meeting the needs for students, regardless of the intervention, yet she still remained somewhat cautious about the impact of acceleration on students emotionally.

Summary of case study – principal #3. Ms. Adkins is in her third year as an elementary principal in the study district. She taught middle school English for three years and then went into administration. She has been committed to growing the gifted population in her school and throughout the interview exuded a positivity about meeting the needs of students in the face of the general status quo about public education. She expressed caution about using whole-grade acceleration, but, as an educator who is passionate about her role, she did not communicate exaggerated resistance to grade skipping.

Ms. Adkins is committed to meeting the needs of students, but her limited experiences with whole-grade acceleration seemed to influence some of her decision making. Unfortunately, this makes sense if she did not feel supported from central office personnel. Therefore, she developed a framework for working through the one request she had to make the best possible decision for the student and family.

Case Study – Principal #4

Principal #4, Mr. Peter Roberts, has served as a principal in the study district and a neighboring district for a total of nine years. He has a bachelor's of science degree in physical education and a master's in educational leadership. He has 13 years of

experience at all three levels teaching special education and physical education. He indicated he has not completed any coursework or training in gifted education.

Mr. Roberts was an assistant principal for three years and a principal for six years in another school district. He has been at his current school for three years. The school is a Title 1 K-5 elementary school with over 500 students that is majority White. Sixty-five percent receive free and reduced-price lunch, 20% are African American, and 10% are English language learners. When asked what the percentage of identified gifted students was, he answered, "I can't guess."

It is actually 9%. He has arranged for some professional development for his staff and shared

So we've done just an overview of gifted services in the school division. And I would probably just limit it to that. Nothing over and above that other than differentiating in meeting the needs of the gifted higher-performing students in your classes.

The interview took place at a time of his convenience. I found Mr. Roberts to be eager to participate on the one hand, while concerned whether he was doing okay on the other hand. At times he seemed uncomfortable with his lack of answers and this stood out to me because he had nothing to compare his baseline of knowledge. What I found, however, was an interview participant who was reflective, responsive, and supremely committed to considering this intervention if it would help support his students. Time and again my field notes had comments on his ruminations. Overall, I found Mr. Roberts to be very open and genuine with his answers.

Research question #1: What background knowledge do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

After discussing his background and learning about the school's demographics, the interview questions turned to his knowledge about whole-grade acceleration. In response to whether the district had a policy on acceleration, he said, "I know there's a policy that possibly exists, but I'm not familiar with it specifically." In fact, he said he would consider grade skipping but,

It's not an option now. Well, it is kind of an option now, but I think it would be marketable and accepted with a formalized policy and procedure from the division. And I would definitely support it because, as I previously stated, I think it meets the needs of each individual student.

He did not know there has been a school board-approved policy for decades.

Mr. Roberts said he was unaware of the research on acceleration, but considered what a student might "look like" who was accelerated,

I immediately think of a pretty smart kid who has great potential. And this is probably a myth—well, not a myth, but a concern would be of mine that I've probably had a couple of them in my career, and I haven't identified that.

In addition, what stands out to him is,

That I have a gem of a student here that I need to make sure that I provide for them what they need to be successful. And I would be honored to have that opportunity if I had a student like that in my school.

Mr. Roberts was very reflective throughout the interview. He often paused, suggesting a concern that his answers were not as complete as perhaps he thought I expected. He was

not aware that I was deeply impacted by his willingness to learn more about whole-grade acceleration if it could influence students' educational experiences. He concluded,

I think it can be a good thing if given the right environment to help them be successful later. After this conversation, I'd really like to have the opportunity to have a little bit of training on how to identify them and what are characteristics of them so that it could be made a little bit more aware of them to see if there are students that are under my watch to ensure that they have this available. But I would definitely wholeheartedly support whole-grade acceleration.

This was an insightful comment from a principal with little knowledge or experience with this intervention.

Unlike research on whole-grade acceleration, Mr. Roberts was familiar with the literature on retention. He said, "Yes. It's not in the positive. It's not a positive strategy for students typically." I asked why he had encountered 10 cases of retention in the last three years but acceleration has not been requested at all. He paused, then considered,

Because I think we look at the benchmark and whether our kids reach the benchmark or not. And the ones that don't reach that norm or that expectation or they fall short of that, then the belief is that they won't be successful in the next year. And if we were to look at a gifted or extremely bright student, I don't know that there's a benchmark at the top that would identify someone who would be a candidate for whole-grade acceleration.

He did not know about tools like the Iowa Acceleration Scale that would provide guidance on how to identify students for acceleration.

Research question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Principal Roberts has never received a request for whole-grade acceleration. When asked to clarify if he had ever had a request, he specified, “Not from a parent, not from a teacher, or that I would consider for this opportunity.” I inquired why and he added,

I think that as a society we just kind of feel like everybody needs to serve their time at certain grade levels and do the things that everybody else does. And it doesn't happen very often unless you demonstrate a superior ability to be successful in the classroom.

As the interview progressed and he indicated there were no requests for whole-grade acceleration coupled with his never having had conversations with principals, senior leadership, or teachers in nine years, the questions became more hypothetical. He paused when asked what he would do if he received a request for grade skipping. He said,

First, how do I decide what steps to take? How to decide what steps to take. I guess I would try to consider any issues that could arise from a movement such as this. So therefore I would consider looking at the student's data. Look at socialization factors. Look at parent input, teacher input, my supervisor, and any curriculum leaders that have had experience with and could advise on the process and the steps to take to ensure that it was a possibility or how to make it happen. And then another factor would be state testing, how that would, if at all, need to be addressed.

Importantly, the response included many important components to consider. In addition, he would review, “student sample works. I would need to see any formalized testing that has gone on. I would need to see specific subject area assessments that we give at the division and school level. Teacher survey. Parent survey.”

Frequently, Mr. Roberts demonstrated thoughtfulness about his practice. While he had no professional experiences with students skipping a grade and, therefore, no knowledge about possible outcomes, I asked if he would consider this intervention and he said, “Yes. I would definitely consider that.” He couldn’t think of anyone in particular, but reflected,

No one in particular. Well, there’s potential in a couple of the kids that I have now that I know could potentially be successful. And if I could place blame, I think that my experience, the places that I’ve served as the principal, we focus more on the lower-performing students and never really look at the gifted students as to making sure that we meet their needs.

Research question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

The interview concluded with Mr. Roberts considering possible benefits and challenges associated with students who skip a grade. He noted, “I just see that the overall benefit is meeting the academic needs of the student to ensure that they’re successful, being challenged, and they’re growing every day in their academic areas.” He continued discussing other benefits,

And then probably on the teacher side is once this is implemented or put into practice, going back to what I talked a little bit about previously, we tend to focus

on the lower-performing students. I think this will bring into the spotlight the need to address those highest students.

At one point, Mr. Roberts stopped me to reflect and added,

I'm sorry; one more thing that just came to my head is that I think that with a formalized process and identification and program as such, I think there's a positive message to the community that could be gleaned that we are addressing and there is a process to meet the needs of all students whether they are high performers or low performers.

Even though he did not know about the formal process, he thoughtfully considered the ways it could positively impact the school community.

Research question #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

I was surprised that the only challenges Mr. Roberts imagined had to do with the school setting. My field notes revealed my surprise that here was a principal not overly concerned about the social and emotional impact of acceleration on a student. Rather, he said, "Well, I see a challenge as being teacher acceptance and knowledge of how to meet the needs of students that participate in this." Finally,

I would say that number one, just like I've talked a little bit about, probably not an understanding of this process so much, or training provided or professional development provided to administration or teachers. So I think that getting them to buy in and believe and accept students would be a bit of a challenge.

Principal Roberts was weighting the logistical matters of personnel and processes for an intervention he has never experienced.

Summary of case study - principal #4. Mr. Roberts is a veteran principal with extensive teaching experience. He was self-effacing and appeared apologetic for not being knowledgeable about whole-grade acceleration. However, he was reflective and thoughtful about learning more to make informed decisions in the future. What stood out was his willingness to make decisions for students to support their individual educational needs, including, if necessary, acceleration.

The interview was authentic and he was not trying to give the researcher the “right” answers. He took ownership and one time said, “If I could place blame” for not knowing much about acceleration he demonstrated a willingness to take responsibility for not being knowledgeable. The transcript showed he actually did not possess knowledge, perceptions, or beliefs about whole-grade acceleration.

Case Study – Principal #5

Principal #5, Mr. Gary Allen, is a veteran with 35 years in education. He has been a principal for 20 years in this school district and 10 in his current elementary school. He holds a bachelor’s degree in elementary education, a master’s in educational administration, and is endorsed in administration K-12. He has not completed any gifted educational coursework. As an administrator he has participated in professional development provided by the study district. Mr. Allen shared,

“I’ve sat in on some of the trainings to help them not only identify, but develop and differentiate their instruction accordingly for the gifted learner. I’ve participated in some sessions with [Coordinator of Gifted Education] as we have ramped up our efforts to more effectively assess and cluster our students.

I noted he paused after sharing several opportunities and then his humor showed through when, as a 35-year veteran, said, “But I’m going to have to stroll down memory lane to get more precise on some of the exact trainings that we’ve had. I know there have been a variety of them over the years.”

Mr. Allen taught third grade for 10 years and enjoyed teaching math, science, and social studies the most. He then spent two years as an assistant principal. He has been principal of his current school for 10 years. The school has approximately 730 students K-5 with 20% free and reduced-price lunch, 16% African American, and 4% Hispanic. The school has 12% of students identified as gifted. When asked about the percentage, he said,

That’s a good one. I have not heard that this year. I would guess in the range of 8-10%. It has certainly increased since our new approach to identifying earlier. Probably in years past I would have said closer to 2-4% because of the focus on grades four and five.

The district has begun identifying students in primary grades which has increased the number of students eligible for gifted services.

The interview was scheduled at a time convenient with Mr. Allen and we met in his office. He was relaxed, confident, and thoughtful throughout. This was a conversation with a principal who had experienced a case of whole-grade acceleration last year. I anticipated a more thorough understanding of the intervention but I sensed in him a concern of being wrong. What stood out was what he communicated and that his “bank of experiences” influences his practice. I anticipated much could be learned from his experiences.

Research question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Mr. Allen experienced one case of whole-grade acceleration last year and was keenly aware of guidelines and practices, but not as much about a policy. He began, “Our school system I do believe has had a very minimal worded policy on retention or acceleration. I would not be able to quote whatever is minimal. More guidance than perhaps even policy, if I’m correct.” However, he was much more thorough discussing the process. He outlined,

We do now have a process. The structure of the process has increased with [central office leadership]. My experience had been that there was somewhat of a process there before, but much looser. It generally paralleled what we typically do for retention. And although there are elements now that continue to parallel what we do for retention, now there’s more structure and I would say probably a more reliable process to help guide everyone around the table in making a reliable decision with the child’s best interest in mind.

While unable to remember the name of the tool used (Iowa Acceleration Scale), he continued,

There is an actual resource to be used to gauge people’s perspectives on the child and reach a quantifiable perspective on where that resource suggests the decision lies, whether it is a solid suggestion for consideration for acceleration or perhaps not as reliable, if those are the right words to use. That wasn’t in place before, so I think that’s been helpful.

He was asked to consider what might happen if whole-grade acceleration was an option at his school. He shared,

That we're going to have people referring constantly, even if they're misguided referrals, for consideration for such a state. . . I always thought before that our approach to the referral process was sort of hush-hush, that we feared just what that quote implied that if we, so to speak, advertised it more, build it and they will come kind of thing. But to this date, I can't say that it has dramatically increased.

I probed further, wondering if it might be more of a myth than a reality. He answered, "I would say more than that, although, I guess, yeah, that's a good way to describe it, more a myth. Or an apprehension that you'd be opening the flood gates. [It] has not played out that way."

As a result of that one experience, Mr. Allen had this to say about whole-grade acceleration,

I'm open to it only because of my own personal experience. I think we often are locked into this mindset that a six- or seven-year-old has to be in first grade, that exceptionality does exist. And, unfortunately in our constraints, public education or—we'll just say public education, our constraints with how we organize ourselves is not as open and free-flowing as it maybe needs to be.

However, when asked if he knew the research on the intervention, replied, "Not in any precise manner, no." He shared the following on some of the stereotypes, "That perhaps that the traditional teacher or curriculum has failed to meet the needs, that there weren't

opportunities to meet those needs within the same age level, grade level that we generally group our kids at.”

In asking additional questions about what his knowledge of whole-grade acceleration, the conversation turned to a comparison with retention. He said,

I think what I know is that, again, it [acceleration] seems to parallel retention, but a little bit more profitable as an opportunity for a certain kind of learner. I think the research suggests that there is more of a detrimental risk in retaining a child than there is in promoting a child.

Mr. Allen added to his narrative in discussing acceleration and retention as educational interventions. He considered,

In my mind, something like that is considered an intervention of sort, much like retention. And there sort of is a flowchart process approach to that in my mind that that represents a more drastic intervention, a little more riskier of an intervention, not knowing necessarily even with the best of criteria, assessments, perspectives, whether it will end up being the right thing to do for the child. So as you build, that to me represents an intervention as far as meeting that type of child’s needs very high on the pyramid of intervention.

Last year, Mr. Allen had one parent request whole-grade acceleration for her daughter. And yet, it was the principal’s interactions with the teacher that surprised him. He was reassured that there was a viable process and tool that was going to be used to make a consensus, objective decision about placement. However, in actuality, he shared,

I was surprised that the current teacher was, who I would describe as a very conservative teacher, once we began dialoging about it and she had a chance to

think through it and maybe research it a little bit, she was in support of it. I think most teachers might not consider it to be the thing to do for a child.

Unfortunately, during the acceleration committee meeting, while having been encouraged to choose a receiving teacher amenable to this intervention, that teacher was not a proponent of grade skipping. Principal Allen continued by articulating the importance of the receiving teacher by stating,

Hoping that people can continue to have an open mind and not be too rooted in what they believe is or is not the right thing to do. I don't remember her being an actual dissenter, but she was not what I would describe as a fluid receptor of it. It was sort of like almost laying in wait for what was going to go wrong.

He continued,

My experience is that sometimes people come to the table with predetermined decisions. "It's gotta be special ed" sticks out more in my mind than "gotta be gifted." Teachers, and I suppose administrators, can often come to the table already rooted in their mindset about what has to be. And if an instrument [IAS] might suggest otherwise or two or three out of the five or six assembled would suggest otherwise, that can pose a difficult situation not only in the moment, but in the aftermath. It can be perceived by teachers and others that their opinions weren't valued. It has the potential for fallout. I think we experienced that a little bit recently when we brought what would have been the teacher [for] the child [who] did go to acceleration, the second grade teacher, philosophically it was not her thing.

It appeared from his reflections, that the experience caused him to consider the decisions he might make in future cases of acceleration. He suggested he might make changes moving forward by concluding,

Because you develop a bank of experiences that you fall back on. You can't help it, and you need that. Every situation will be different, but there are patterns and pieces of the process that were learned through going through that hopefully would benefit the next cases. If I had had five and all five were unsuccessful, I still need to be professional and open-minded about my approach, as I said earlier. . . I would hope that the experiences still leave anyone open-minded and respectful to trying to reach the best decision possible with all that can be brought together.

He promised that if all of his cases had been negative, that next case of acceleration could be right for that particular child.

Mr. Allen discussed what he learned about the academic outcomes of his one accelerant. He explained,

I think that generally speaking, while there have been some bumps in the road, it has proven to be the reasonably correct thing to do. It never hits on all cylinders. If there was a concern and needed to be facilitated and managed by the parent.

But along academic lines, I think it has done what it needed to be.

However, there were concerns about the student socially where “the maturation piece, it proved to be a little bit more difficult for the child to pick up on the social cues.” Mr. Allen was actually referring to the potential difficulties of students moving into middle school where physical size lags behind and a student may stand out. Emotionally, he

remembered that the student may have struggled a bit about new challenges in the degree of rigor in class. He shared,

Most recently, the one that we accelerated I think was in an adjustment period in particular because we did it sort of in the middle of the year, wasn't necessarily putting their best foot forward. Was used to things coming so easy, and when certain things weren't coming easy, wasn't putting the best foot forward that she could based on the abilities that we knew were there.

It was interesting to review my field notes where I commented the principal did not see this as an academic issue but, rather, an emotional one. The student was academically very successful by year's end.

Research question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

Principal Allen considered the benefits of whole-grade acceleration and, even after a successful case last year, was disinclined to champion any one benefit. Rather, he explained,

But we never really know. And we're so time-constricted with knowing if we're successful with what we do. You want to know as quickly as you can that it was the right thing to do, but it takes time. And while I'm saying the one we worked through last year is successful this year, it might not be successful next year. It can hit different roadblocks like heading into middle school a year earlier.

It seems that after decades in education Mr. Allen is still somewhat cautious about considering whole-grade acceleration as a go-to intervention for gifted students.

Research question #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

On the other hand, the principal was more expressive about what he perceived to be the challenges of acceleration. Quite succinctly, he said, “Being wrong” and “I think it presents still too much of the unknown.” The overriding concern for students’ welfare is evident, yet neither supported by his experience nor the research on acceleration.

Summary of case study - principal #5. Mr. Allen is a veteran educator with 20 years of experience as a building principal. He has been in his current school for 10 years and holds a master’s degree in education administration. He has not completed gifted coursework but participates in division-provided professional development. His school has an identified gifted population of 12% and is aware of only one referral for whole-grade acceleration received of last year.

The principal’s experiences seemed to have informed his decision-making with regards to the process from last year where he became aware of the importance of choosing an appropriate potential receiving teacher. However, overall, while he indicated he would follow through with any request, regardless of his past experiences, his own perceptions and beliefs continue to influence his overall caution to consider whole-grade acceleration as an intervention for gifted students. Finally, it is important to note that his expressed opinions are not necessarily contrary to his caution about any intervention for students because the future is unknown for all of them.

Case Study – Principal #6

Principal #6, Mrs. Sharon Carson, has been an elementary school principal for seven years, three years at her current school. She has a bachelor’s degree in health and

physical education and a master's degree in educational leadership. She has not completed any gifted education coursework. She has participated in professional development provided by the study district on the characteristics of gifted learners and differentiation strategies. Mrs. Carson taught for 25 years, 24 as a middle school science teacher.

Principal Carson served as an assistant principal for six years and she has been a principal the past seven. Her current school has an enrollment of over 450 students in K-5 that is majority White and 21% African American. Other populations, such as Asian and Hispanic, comprise only 1-2% of the enrollment. The school has a minimal English language learner population and 30% of students are on free and reduced-price lunch. She indicated 16% of students are identified special education but did not know the percentage of students identified gifted is 11%.

The interview occurred in the principal's office and we had a quiet and calm place to talk. Mrs. Carson is an incredibly caring and nurturing leader for her school—staff and students. She believes strongly in her teachers and is eager to do as much as possible for students and their families. She has not had any recent experiences with whole-grade acceleration, but I was reassured that she seemed to know intuitively certain factors that should be considered with grade skipping and aligned with the Iowa Acceleration Scale. However, her body language did reflect, at times, a caution or struggle about what she believes about whole-grade acceleration.

Research question #1: What background knowledge do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

This principal knew there was a combination district policy on acceleration and retention and that the guidelines were similar for both. However, when asked what the research said about acceleration, she responded, “Can’t say that I have an answer or an opinion on that one.” Experientially, though, she shared what stands out in her mind about the intervention,

A very intelligent student who is working at a pace in all content areas beyond what is being offered in one grade level and providing them the opportunity to move to a grade level that provides a more challenging curriculum to engage those students and keep them motivated to want to learn and to want to be successful in school.

The response was interesting because it appeared to support the use of grade skipping in schools; yet, she paused when asked to consider a request for whole-grade acceleration. If she was going through the process, she shared what might make it a difficult educational option to consider by saying, “Other than it’s a very difficult decision to make because there’s not a checklist that if the child shows this and this and this, then you know whole-grade acceleration is most appropriate.” She added,

I don’t have a problem with it. If students truly could benefit from skipping a whole grade, I’m perfectly fine with it. I struggle with making sure that the decision to either accelerate them or not to accelerate them is the right one. . . . But just as with retention, it’s a tough decision to make.

My field notes reminded me that she was somewhat reluctant about acceleration because there was no “crystal ball” to ensure the child would be successful in the future.

Again, this principal continued to make connections between the disparate interventions of retention and whole-grade acceleration. When asked why there is a joint policy, Mrs. Carson reflected,

Probably because we need to consider the same factors when we make that decision. It's not just a single thing that we look at. I also think because they're both very difficult decisions to make, and you want to make sure that you've done a significant amount of research, it's not a hasty decision.

Interestingly, she had indicated she was unfamiliar with the research on acceleration.

However, when asked about the literature on retention, she shared,

I do know that the research does not support retention, just blanket support retention, that you really need to look carefully at the students. If a student is retained, there needs to be something in place that's going to be different than the current situation in order for it to be successful. Students who are retained have a greater likelihood of dropping out and not completing high school. Retention is more successful for students at a younger age than it is older.

Mrs. Carson considered the effect of retention on under-performing students and attributing the same outcomes on gifted students. The joint policy of acceleration and retention may unduly influence a principal's perception about grade skipping.

Research question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Mrs. Carson has had no personal or professional experiences with whole-grade acceleration as a principal. She considered, "I don't know that I've ever been involved in

one as an administrator.” As an assistant principal she was involved in a request to accelerate a student from third grade to fifth grade. In that case,

It ended up the decision was made not to accelerate the student, and everything was fine. Differentiation was provided in the next grade level. It was a tenuous situation as we were going through the process, but when the decision was made and we had some data to share with the parents that the child just didn’t really have the skill set to be able to skip an entire grade it was okay.

In retelling the event, Mrs. Carson’s body language and facial features seemed to exhibit a relief that the student remained in a “normal” age peer situation and in the “normal” grade.

With one student she was familiar with who grade skipped, the student was successful academically and socially. “She had a little perky personality, so social interactions were a little strained for her without being accelerated. She found a friend. She wasn’t ostracized by any stretch of the imagination. And she did have peer relationships,” Principal Carson remembered. I probed further wondering if she suffered any more greatly having been accelerated and Mrs. Carson indicated that being grade skipped did not affect her socially or emotionally.

Research question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

Considering possible benefits to students who accelerate seemed more elusive to Mrs. Carson. Her perspective was school-based but she began by suggesting,

I think if a child really has a high level of intelligence, we want the child to be challenged. And this is certainly not a reason to or not to, but I think for classroom

teachers sometimes it can be a challenge for a child who is so far advanced to differentiate everything. And if the child is able to handle the workload, socially can be successful, then I think that could be the best opportunity for the child.

She continued to discuss the benefits of whole-grade acceleration,

No, no. . . I think if the child could benefit from it. In the school setting, and again, I don't want this to sound selfish because this isn't about really the teachers and making instruction easy for them. But, I think definitely if the child is with their peers who are performing at the same ability level, I do think it makes it easier for the teachers to provide instruction.

Mrs. Carson considered that the institution of school may influence decision-making about acceleration.

Research questions #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

It was not surprising to listen to this study participant talk about potential challenges to whole-grade acceleration as an intervention for gifted students because the interview protocol responses had been very consistent. Her caution was expressed when she said, "I guess the challenge is once the decision has been made, if for whatever reason, the child is not successful, I guess that would be a liability as well." Surprisingly, Mrs. Carson was worried she might miss a student who should be accelerated. She concluded,

That we didn't accelerate a student who truly was capable of handling the acceleration and, for whatever reason, we opted not to and the next year we

encountered similar situations of boredom, frustration, and effect of hating, not wanting to come to school, not being challenged.

I did not expect this perspective because her interview responses had been consistent in both caution about the intervention and the lack of professional or personal experiences. Rather, this response reflected what I knew of this principal being committed to providing the best academic plan for all students. The gap was exposed in the lack of knowledge of whole-grade acceleration for gifted students.

Summary of case study - principal #6. Mrs. Carson is a veteran educator with decades of teaching and administrative experience. She has a master's degree in educational leadership but never completed any coursework in gifted education. However, she does participate in professional development provided by the study district. She has great belief in her staff and supports her students and families.

Mrs. Carson is very knowledgeable about district policy and guidelines about acceleration and retention but has had extremely limited experiences with requests for whole-grade acceleration. She was aware that academically and socially the one student she knew who grade skipped was successful. The benefits and challenges of whole-grade acceleration for gifted students were not easy questions for this principal to answer from her limited experience. Policy and guidelines were clearly understood, yet personal perceptions and beliefs were evident in many of Mrs. Carson's answers. Her sense of caution was expressed despite an understanding of guidelines.

Case Study – Principal #7

Principal #7, Mr. Raymond Vincent, is a second-year elementary principal. He has a bachelor's in psychology and master's degrees in both elementary education and

educational leadership with an emphasis in policy, planning, and leadership. During his master's in teaching program, he completed a for credit course in gifted education. For eight years he taught second and third grades.

Mr. Vincent was an assistant principal for two years before becoming a principal two years ago. When asked if he had received training in gifted since becoming a principal, he responded, "I'd say vicariously, kind of piece by piece. Not necessarily days of professional development devoted specifically to gifted instruction, but certainly embedded in other types of professional development." He indicated topics have included cluster grouping, use of identification assessments, and differentiation of instruction for gifted students. I noted, however, that Mr. Vincent was reluctant to answer whether he had arranged for any professional development in gifted as a principal. He paused as if saying "no" was not an acceptable answer. Instead, he said he had collaborated with the gifted resource teacher to provide training to staff.

His school has just over 600 students in grades K-5. He described the school as median-income without the extremes of very affluent or very low income. The student population is majority White with 40% free and reduced-price lunch. He did not provide percentages but noted the Hispanic population is growing almost as rapidly as African American. He added, "We do have an up and growing English language learner population as well." Mr. Vincent was unaware that 8% of students are eligible for gifted services.

I arrived early so I could observe the office staff and watch interactions among personnel. What stood out was an enormous sense of camaraderie and unwavering dedication to this principal. He leads by example and, while he has high standards for

students and teachers, there is a happiness and joy evident in their work. I looked forward to this interview because Mr. Vincent is passionate and dedicated to public education and I knew that he had personal and professional experiences with whole-grade acceleration.

Research question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Mr. Vincent served on a district committee to review the policy on acceleration but was unsure whether it had been completed and presented for approval by the school board. Experientially, however, he comprehensively shared,

I was fortunate enough to go through the process of whole-grade acceleration in the past year. I know that it begins with a teacher identification or a parent request. We have a meeting and really kinda look through data and talk about the student followed by a series of assessments taken by the student independently to determine on a nationally normed level where the student ranks. And we come back together and describe or review the assessments with a panel of educators and specialists and use the data to drive the determination.

Moreover, he added,

I think the importance of the process, the importance of making a solid decision based on data. I think about what it means for the child above all. There's an educational piece, but there is an important social and emotional piece that I think should be considered for the student.

I continued to wonder if Mr. Vincent's personal experience with being considered for whole-grade acceleration influenced his belief that it should be an option for students in his school. In discussing his personal feelings about acceleration, he remarked,

I think on a case-by-case basis, it can be exactly what the student needs to propel academically. As an administrator, I'm certainly not opposed to going through that process and moving a kid forward. I don't believe that students will maintain a joy of learning and education if they are stagnated or if they don't feel that their teachers are interested in their growth, if they feel like they're being kinda squelched and not able to really grow academically. I think that you will lose them, and that's where we get behavior and kids with low self-esteem who are actually really, really, really, really brilliant, but they're not given that opportunity to show. So, on a personal level, it's something that I'm certainly willing to consider for a student who meets the criteria.

That was the moment I noted this principal understood that with the right process and guidelines, whole-grade acceleration needs to be an option in our schools, regardless of what the decision makers may know about grade skipping—an open-mindedness that is difficult to maintain if administrators are not knowledgeable about this intervention for gifted students.

Mr. Vincent reflected on what he knew about whole-grade acceleration and shared how this intervention correlates to retention,

The research, not necessarily as much, especially for gifted students specifically. I think that here at the elementary level we spend more time than I'm comfortable with on retention. And we really don't flip that coin as much to the other side.

And so we're looking kind of at if you're smart or if you're gifted, you're okay and you don't require my attention. It's you all that are lower than standard or lower than where you should be that require the attention, and so you get the intervention, and you get the resources.

He knew that the research on retention reveals that it is not an effective intervention for students. Other than that, he was not sidetracked by retention in discussing acceleration.

Professionally, this participant had one case of acceleration last year and discussed what steps he took in following district guidelines. In talking about getting feedback from colleagues, he shared, "Last year was my first experience with having that discussion. I did speak with other principals about if you've done this how did you do it, and what did you find the results to be, do you still think it was a good decision?" He hoped they had experiences and he could follow their process. Unfortunately, what he found was, "Actually, many of the responses were, 'I haven't done it before.' Many principals that I spoke with hadn't had that experience before. They've had experiences on the other end, retention, but not as much with whole-grade acceleration." Through a collaborative approach to his case of acceleration, he concluded,

And, in retrospect, I certainly feel like we made the right decision for that student and for the family. Certainly more comfortable with the process now or just knowing what to look for, knowing what I'm looking for in a student, knowing what I'm looking for in instruction, and how to read parents on a case so sensitive. But also just every experience is an experience. Good or bad, you're going to get something from it.

Mr. Vincent also had a personal experience with the idea of grade skipping. He remembered, “Quite honestly, I was a candidate for whole-grade acceleration when I was in elementary school. My mother was very much against it. But, as a child, I remember my perception being, wow, this is so cool, I get to move up ahead of my friends.” So, as a principal, he has had positive experiences personally and professionally.

When asked to share academic outcomes of the student who grade skipped last year, she enthusiastically shared, “Very strong. I’d say academically solid, but not performing as high as he was as a second-grade student. Still noteworthy, but not 100s on everything or 98s on everything. But certainly working to his full potential, I’d say.” I asked if the fact that this student was not performing at the most exceptional level would influence considering future acceleration requests, he quickly interjected,

Not at all. I think that there should be a level of challenge to education and to the work that a student is doing. And I think that there’s always room for improvement and room for growth. And so my initial thinking is not that you move this student from second acing everything to third grade that he would continue to ace everything. Part of the hope was that okay, well now we have a challenge. Not necessarily that that challenge means that now you’re going to make B’s, but that you’re actually working and using your critical thinking skills and using all that you’ve learned K, 1, 2 to apply your knowledge.

Principal Vincent continued to describe the accelerant’s social outcomes by sharing,

At the beginning, socially was difficult simply because for this student, many students knew that he had moved from second grade to third grade. Because a student is a little bit—he’s kinda quiet. Well, he’s extremely quiet, actually. He’s

very quiet. He didn't like the attention of "I know you were in second grade, now you're in third grade. Oh my gosh, that's so cool. How'd you do that?" He didn't like the attention. There were tears in the beginning. And on his part, certainly not regret, but he was definitely overwhelmed by the transition. And that lasted maybe a week or two. And following that, once he made some friends and talked with the teacher, talked with our school counselor, he was able to kinda just acclimate. Certainly wasn't as emotional, made friends, and moved forward positively.

I asked how the student was doing socially as a fourth grader and Mr. Vincent said the student was

still very, very quiet. Still very focused on his academics. But having had that time to get to know the students, make new friends, he's certainly more outgoing in the classroom than he was in the grade that he was accelerated to in third grade.

Research question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

I frequently wrote in my field notes that this principal consistently spoke about what is best for students and not as specifically about the impact of acceleration on schools. So, I was interested to learn what he would consider to be the benefits of grade skipping. He shared,

Students being challenged at a higher level. Students being appropriately placed to receive the curriculum that they need to grow academically. . . Students having an understanding that school can be catered to me, and school can be catered to what I can do academically. I don't have to just sit here and learn this just

because everyone else is. If I do well, then people will understand that perhaps I can do more and that's a consideration that I can have. Just knowing that is an option for me if I continue to work hard. I don't have to be stuck in this place forever, but there's another option for me if I continue to display my knowledge.

His comments were very reflective and forward thinking and struck me as interesting juxtaposed by his admission he did not know what the research says about acceleration. Rather, his experiences and open-mindedness influenced his willingness to consider grade skipping for gifted students.

Research question #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

The only time I noted a bit of caution about using whole-grade acceleration was when the principal considered its challenges. He shared,

There's that fear of the unknown. You always worry about did I do the right thing, was this the right decision? So there's just that fear of the unknown and what will it look like when and if that student levels off? Or will that student get to a place of regret where they wish that they would have stayed with their peers? So just that one challenge of just being unsure of the future.

I asked him if he was reluctant to consider whole-grade acceleration and he paused before saying,

Only that it's so uncommon that it's territory that we may hesitate to go in because we think, oh, you know, we can just differentiate a little bit more. Or the student is getting enrichment from other places. So the reluctance and possibly the whole process of moving forward through whole-grade acceleration, assuming

or believing that teachers can care for the student's needs in their current classroom.

This was the only time I sensed Mr. Vincent was reluctant because there was so little experience about the implementation and outcomes of grade skipping.

Summary of case study - principal #7. Mr. Vincent has been a building principal for two years and taught for eight years. He has participated in some professional development in gifted education. More important are his personal and professional experiences with whole-grade acceleration. They seem to have influenced his disagreement that public education is a lock-step institution where students are expected to remain with their age-peers.

As a second grader, Mr. Vincent was recommended by his teacher to skip a grade. His mother, however, was not in favor of this intervention. Mr. Vincent was not upset about his mother's decision; rather, he was excited at the idea his teacher thought he was smart and he could still go to school! Many years later, as a principal, parents requested that their child be considered for grade skipping. Throughout the process, Mr. Vincent remained open-minded and included many personnel in the decision-making process in order to make the best-informed decision. This principal was aware of the positive outcomes academically, socially, and emotionally for the student. In addition, he displayed little to no reluctance to the future use of this intervention.

Case Study – Principal #8

Principal #8, Mrs. Elizabeth Cole, has been an elementary principal for four years. She has a bachelor's degree in education and master's degrees in both K-12 administration and reading, language, and literacy. She did not complete any gifted

coursework but has participated in limited training in gifted education since becoming an administrator.

Mrs. Cole was a classroom teacher for 15 years. She taught second and third grade and for the majority of those years she was an inclusion teacher serving both special education and gifted students. She then spent five years as a reading specialist before becoming an assistant principal for two years.

Her school has just under 500 students in grades K-5 and has a culturally diverse population of which 45% is free and reduced-price lunch, 15% English language learners, and 10% homeless. She estimated identified gifted students was 8-10% and it is actually 10%. Since Mrs. Cole became a principal she has not arranged for any professional development for her staff related to gifted education.

Our interview took place one afternoon in her office. Unfortunately, numerous issues required her frequent attention and she was working with students who had some discipline issues. We were interrupted a couple of times yet I found her focus and attention on the questions to be very consistent. She is very knowledgeable about the needs of her students and staff and provides consistent support to them. It is interesting that although Principal Cole had no recent experiences with whole-grade acceleration, her instincts of what steps to take were very precise, often reflecting certain components of the Iowa Acceleration Scale. Mrs. Cole knew there was a policy on acceleration but said,

I'm vaguely familiar with it. It's been two to three years since the last time I read it. But again, that it is a process that closely mirrors the child study process that we initiate when we're determining a student's eligibility for special education or retention. So, it's similar in both situations.

She was aware of the process and guidelines related to whole-grade acceleration as outlined by the study district. However, when I asked if grade skipping was an option at her school, she hesitated before answering, “It’s my understanding it’s an option in the division, so, yes.” At the time it did not look or sound like an unwavering endorsement of grade skipping.

Research question #1: What background knowledge do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Mrs. Cole thought about whole-grade acceleration and she shared what stands out in her mind,

A student who is both academically and intellectually very strong, but also has a level of maturity that is going to allow them to access the benefits of healthy social relationships and collaboration with peers at that next grade level. I think, again, it’s about the whole child.

Admittedly, though, she did not know what the research says about acceleration. She did know that the research on retention reveals it is not a successful intervention for a student. She added, “And again, it’s [retention] not short term; it’s permanent. . . Again, because the research shows that for most children it is not a successful long-term decision. It may appear successful within the first several years, but long-term it does not help the child reach the goals.” I began to wonder if there was some sort of subconscious correlation between what principals know about the research on retention and what they admittedly do not know about the research on acceleration. Mrs. Cole said acceleration is a very appropriate option but has no personal experiences with the intervention and throughout the interview there was a caution against using it for gifted students. Perhaps

the issue is a lack of awareness that retention is for typically low-achieving students for whatever reasons, and grade skipping would only be appropriate for high-ability learners who have the aptitude for the next grade level or levels.

Research questions #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

In the last three years as a principal Mrs. Cole has not had any requests for whole-grade acceleration. Over more than 20 years in education she knew of only three to four students who were considered for grade skipping. I wondered if she had spoken with colleagues about acceleration, she remarked, “Honestly, I can’t think right off the top of my head the last time I was involved in an acceleration decision which would have necessitated that conversation.” She paused, then added, “Acceleration is a very rare topic of conversation.” She reasoned, “I think with our philosophy, particularly for literacy instruction in [this district], we differentiate extensively for our children’s instruction.” It is true, most placement decisions at the elementary level are based solely on students’ reading ability, yet there are ceilings at which teachers cannot truly gauge the reading ability of high-ability learners.

Mrs. Cole’s lack of exposure to whole-grade acceleration was evident when she was asked about academic, social, or emotional outcomes of any student who grade skipped. She considered a student who was in class with her daughter and she said the student was successful, “in the sense that they appear, for all outwards appearances, purposes, to have flourished.” There were no known adverse effects on the student for having skipped a grade.

Research question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

The principal was asked to consider what benefits she associates with whole-grade acceleration and she said, “Again, I think it is an option that we must consider when we are doing our due diligence to meet a child’s individual needs. There are children for whom that is the right decision, just like there are children for whom retention is the right decision.” She added, “A happier child probably helps to make for a happier family in those cases.” An interesting comment from a principal who has not had any recent experiences with acceleration.

Research question #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

On the other hand, Mrs. Cole had much to share about the challenges associated with this intervention. She began,

The greatest challenge I think is the same challenge, so to speak, that we face any time we make a decision about a child’s instructional placement be it acceleration, retention or not as much, but to some degree, their eligibility for special education. You are trying to look at where the child is currently based on all of the factual information that you’ve gathered.

She continued,

But to some extent you’re also trying to predict how they will continue to develop and what their needs will continue to be should you not make a change for them. And if you make a change, then of course what would be the possible outcomes.

So again, it's that decision that you are faced with when you're considering retention.

Finally,

What will it look like when this child is in high school and their peers can all drive and they can't? I think there's that kind of crystal ball activity we all go through in our desire to make the best short- and long-term decision.

This principal's cautious remarks revealed a worry about future outcomes. As a result of being unaware of the overwhelmingly positive research about acceleration yet her very limited experience with the intervention was evident during the interview.

Summary of case study - principal #8. Mrs. Cole is a veteran and caring educator who is one to follow all processes and guidelines distributed by the study district. She is very knowledgeable about how schools are run and appears to understand the merits of acceleration. However, she has not experienced any recent cases of whole-grade acceleration and does not know of any academic or social outcomes of the intervention.

Case Study – Principal #9

Principal #9, Mrs. Diana Hunter, is in her second year as an elementary principal. She has a bachelor's of arts with her certification in teaching pre-K-8. She then earned a master's in educational leadership and holds an endorsement in K-12 administration. Mrs. Hunter said she had not completed any coursework or training in gifted education. She taught middle school science for 11 years. When she was the inclusion teacher with special education students, one year she had a cluster of gifted students.

In the study district, Mrs. Hunter was an assistant principal for three years before she was assigned to her current school as principal. Her school has just under 750 students that is majority White and not a Title 1 school. It has a high special education population, few English language learners, and is 26% free and reduced-price lunch. Principal Hunter had recently learned that 8% of the school's population was identified eligible for gifted services. This year, she arranged for professional development for her staff on ways to enrich and differentiate. When discussing why she wanted to provide this training, she said,

So instead of focusing on some of the lower levels to make sure we were reaching some of our level students as well. But she [the presenter] talked more about things like how the students feel that can sometimes slip through the cracks, the emotional dissonance and that kind of thing. So that's kind of what we focused on.

It was refreshing to have a principal consider the needs of high-ability learners.

I arrived at her office looking forward to the interview. While a relatively novice principal she has proven to be eager to learn to be the best possible administrator. She is conscientious and thoughtful and deeply committed to students and staff alike. The fact that she had already provided professional development on gifted to staff stood out. As a result, I was also surprised at her hesitancy and discomfort at time that admitting she was not very knowledgeable about whole-grade acceleration. Given her background, there were times her answers reflected her special education background and lens and not what gifted students specifically may need, including the option of grade skipping.

Research question #1: What background knowledge do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Mrs. Hunter was on a district committee to review the current acceleration policy but, evens so, said, “There hasn’t seemed to have been a very specific policy in place.” She shared what stands out to her about acceleration,

Well, if we’re supposed to meet a student where they are in special education, we should be doing the same thing in gifted education. And if that means that they need to be accelerated so that they’re engaged and they’re challenged, then that’s what we need to do. But I also feel that we can do that without doing whole-grade acceleration, and we can do that by subject area.

I probed further to see what else she knew about acceleration, but she admitted,

I feel like I’ve pretty much told you everything that I know already. I haven’t had any experience with it because it doesn’t happen when they get to middle school. So as a teacher for 11 years, I never had a student who had been accelerated at the middle school level. I don’t know much about the research. I could only assume that it would be positive for those students who really need it because they’re really not challenged in a regular class. I could see where it’s positive from an academic standpoint, but there are some challenges with the social/emotional aspect of it depending especially on the age and maturity level of the child.

Research question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Mrs. Hunter expressed a not unusual caution for the social and emotional welfare of students.

In the first year of her principalship, Mrs. Hunter had one case of whole-grade acceleration; however, she did not use the draft guidelines or Iowa Acceleration Scale. I asked if she had interfaced with other principals or senior leadership and she responded, “I haven’t really had too many discussions. It hasn’t come up much. There’s been more discussion about retention than whole-grade acceleration in my experience.”

Unfortunately, when she reached out to central office administrators, she revealed, “And they all kind of, it wasn’t clear who the specific person was that I was supposed to reach out to. [I received] some guidelines. We did some testing.” She concluded about her first experience,

As a new principal, not having had a specific policy to reference with a set of steps for me to reference made it difficult. Again, that was two years ago. It did not come up this past summer. I don’t really have any other things that make it difficult because my teachers are actually okay with it as long as the student is able to perform.

Her comments revealed a weakness in district communication and guidelines available for use in making informed decisions. It is important to have clear processes available for administrators, most of whom are not knowledgeable about this intervention.

In her first year as principal she had two requests for acceleration—one who did skip a grade and the other who remained with age peers. Related to academic outcomes she explained, “It was very interesting. Of the two students, we felt most confident that the student we placed in first grade most needed the acceleration because she tested so high. So, academically they both did great.” On the other hand, socially the student who grade skipped, “had a really hard time maintaining friendships at the very beginning of

the year because she was so immature compared to the rest of the students, and she hadn't done technically kindergarten. But then she came around." In fact, the interview exposed that many of the characteristics attributed to the student were due to cultural differences rather than the youth or immaturity of the student. Finally, Mrs. Hunter noted that the accelerant ultimately did great emotionally sharing, "She walks into the room like she owns it, like she has no problems."

Research question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

Mrs. Hunter knows of one student who had a positive grade skipping experience, yet her comments about the benefits of whole-grade acceleration were extremely brief. She said, "The increased confidence and self-esteem. That's the main one that I can think of right off the top of my head." So, while the comments were few, the emphasis, surprisingly, was not on the academic outcomes.

Research question #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

However, she spoke at length about the challenges associated with this intervention which seemed in direct conflict with her statement about a benefit to acceleration. She began,

I think that one of the challenges is making sure that socially and emotionally the child's going to fit. There are lots of times where they might be ready academically—well, I would assume plenty of times where they might be ready academically, but you worry about them being able to fit with the class and have friends and maintain friendships.

She added many other challenges, but concluded by saying,

You're making a decision that's going to change a child's life for the rest of their life. You're impacting the next thirteen years if it's kindergarten, first through 12th grade and college. So, I just think it's a huge responsibility. I guess it's a liability. And if you make the wrong choice and that child is not successful, that would be the thing that I would worry about, what have I don't do that child's self-esteem or confidence.

These comments closely mirror the caution that principals tend to articulate about the use of grade skipping for gifted students. If Mrs. Hunter was feeling unknowledgeable and did not find support and resources from central office leadership, it is understanding for a principal to want to err on the side of caution about this seemingly monumental educational intervention.

Summary of case study - principal #9. Mrs. Hunter has been an elementary principal for two years and previously taught middle school science for 11 years. She has little background knowledge and training in gifted education but did arrange for professional development for her staff to be trained in ways to meet high-ability learners. She was aware that 8% of her student population is eligible for gifted services.

While she has experience with whole-grade acceleration requests, she did not feel she received sufficient support or guidelines. This possibly resulted in an inability to articulate the benefits or possible outcomes of using grade skipping for gifted students. She is certainly open to it as an option, but continued to express caution about the unknown long-term effects on students.

Summary of Individual Case Studies

Nine principals participated in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to share their knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration as an academic option for gifted students. I was fortunate to include all elementary principals from the study district to gather a holistic idea of the school district's general understanding and practice of using acceleration. Many principals were unaware of policies or guidelines and all wanted leadership support and resources clearly identified to help guide through the process.

The district has both a policy and procedures for acceleration, but results from the interviews revealed that communication has not been thorough. As a result, principals tended to conflate what they knew about retention and transfer it to grade skipping not knowing what the research literature reveals about acceleration. No principal had conducted any research on acceleration. Yet, administrators were very aware of the research on retention, likely because it is a more frequent intervention in this district. In the last three years, there have been a combined total of five known referrals for grade skipping from the nine study district participants.

An analysis of the nine individual case studies revealed the principals in the study district had very little knowledge or experience with whole-grade acceleration. See Table 2 for a summary of participants' background knowledge in gifted education. Moreover, to varying degrees, their words and/or body language conveyed a wariness about the impact on students who grade skip. Due to a dearth of actual experiences, participants did not articulate many possible benefits and provided an extensive list of challenges or

liabilities. The next section details the results of the study investigation across cases from which certain themes emerged.

Table 2

Principal Background Knowledge about Gifted Education

Principal Name	Gifted Coursework	Gifted Training	Arranged for Staff Training in Gifted	Knowledge of Acceleration Policy	# Referrals for Acceleration Last 3 Years
Ms. Carter	N	Y	N	N	0
Mr. James	N	Y	Y	N	0
Ms. Adkins	Y	Y	Y	N	1
Mr. Roberts	N	N	Y	N	0
Mr. Allen	N	Y	Y	Y	1
Mrs. Carson	N	Y	N	Y	0
Mr. Vincent	Y	Y	Y	Y	1
Mrs. Cole	N	Y	N	Y	0
Mrs. Hunter	N	N	Y	Y	2

Cross-Case Analysis

Data for this study were analyzed in order to recognize themes and patterns from repeated analyses of the transcripts. Also important to note was a general thematic trend across research questions and participant responses vacillated between limited exposure/experience, student welfare, and school logistics. For each question a frequency table is included, as well as a discussion of the emergent themes. The frequency tables provide a visual representation of principal responses to each research question. Study participants had little to no background knowledge, few experiences, and no training in whole-grade acceleration. In addition, principals listed more than 3:1

possible challenges/liabilities to benefits. Following is a restatement of each research question, accompanied by findings from study participants.

Research Question #1: What background knowledge do elementary school principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Table 3 provides information about principals’ background knowledge about acceleration. Three themes emerged from participant responses to research question 1: unfamiliarity with whole-grade acceleration (including subthemes of unfamiliarity with the research, processes/guidelines, and outcomes), student welfare, and school logistics. Each theme will be explored in further detail below.

Table 3

Frequency Distribution for Research Question 1: Background Knowledge of Acceleration

Response	# Occurrences
Knows research on retention	9
Have not done any research on acceleration	8
Sees whole-grade acceleration as an option	5
Unfamiliar with policy on acceleration	4
Concerns about future for students	4
Lack of leadership when considering whole-grade acceleration	4
Request process/guidelines	3
School focus is on remediation/low-performing students	3
Whole-grade acceleration would avoid lock-step notion of public education	3
Want structures to work with parents and avoid perceived elitism	2

Theme: Unfamiliarity. The first theme that emerged was principals’ unfamiliarity with both background information on acceleration and their awareness of district policy, guidelines, and practices.

Subtheme: Unfamiliarity with processes and guidelines. Related to knowledge about policy and guidelines, the principals made the following comments. Ms. Carter shared,

I do not know if there is a policy. I haven't looked at them [guidelines]. I'm sure there are, but I have not looked them up. As an administrator, I have not had the opportunity to promote a kid for acceleration.

Mr. Roberts said,

I would definitely consider [whole-grade acceleration]. It's not an option now. Well it is kind of an option now, but I think it would be marketable and accepted with a formalized policy and procedure from the division. And I would definitely support it because, as I previously stated, I think it meets the needs of each individual student. So I think today, I'd definitely consider it with the right processes in place. I guess we'd have to write them on our own.

Ms. Adkins noted, "I'm not familiar with any guidelines or policies for acceleration. Not to my knowledge." Mr. Allen remarked, "Okay, I know there's policy that probably exists, but I'm not familiar with it specifically" while Mr. James stated, "No. I don't know of anything. I don't know if there's a policy."

Mrs. Hunter and Mr. Vincent both served on a district committee to review revised policy on acceleration. Mrs. Hunter indicated,

I know that they're working on a policy because, at least to my knowledge, there hasn't seemed to have been a very specific policy in place. I had that request [for acceleration] when I was first starting here. And I emailed three folks and kinda

got slightly different answers with no real clear answer as to what policy there is.

So, I don't know that there is a policy.

Finally, Mrs. Cole, who has had no requests for acceleration in the past three years, concluded,

We do [have a policy]. I'm vaguely familiar with it. It's been two or three years since the last time I read it. But again, that it is a process that closely mirrors the child study process that we initiate when we're determining a student's eligibility for special education or retention. So, it's similar in both situations.

Subtheme: Unfamiliarity with whole-grade acceleration. More broadly, principals were asked to describe what they know about whole-grade acceleration. They globally expressed a general unfamiliarity with the topic. When thinking about whole-grade acceleration, Mr. Allen said, "Caution. Opportunity. Gifted. But perhaps not always," was what stood out to him. Ms. Carter added,

Actually, I haven't done a whole lot of research on it, so I don't know the long-term outcomes or impacts of whole-grade acceleration, although I am interested. Would find it fascinating to find out the research studies that have been done on it. That's interesting.

Mr. James shared,

Yes, I'm familiar [with research on acceleration]. I've read the work of Hattie on acceleration. There are pros and cons to it, so I don't think that the research has – I still think it goes back to whether it's best for that child.

Mr. Vincent, who was the only participant considered for whole-grade acceleration himself, and one of two principals, along with Mr. Allen, who went through

the referral and screening process for whole-grade acceleration that used the Iowa Acceleration Scale, responded, “If I had to make an assumption [about whole-grade acceleration], I would think that the research says that it is likely a positive intervention.”

Ms. Adkins considered,

I’m not against it. I don’t know if I know enough about it to be able to sit in a debate and say these are all the reasons for it. But I’m certainly not against accelerating and giving students more opportunities. If I see the need for a student to sit through something that they are proficient or have information with, if they can move forward and accelerate and grow.

When asked whether her colleagues were helpful in providing information about acceleration, Ms. Adkins said, “No. No more than me.” And with regard to any conversations with principals, “I have not had any.”

Mr. Roberts, who has not researched the topic, indicated he would consider whole-grade acceleration for students. When imagining a student who would be considered for this academic option, he shared,

I immediately think of a pretty smart kid who has great potential. And this is probably a myth, well, not a myth, but a concern would be of mine that I’ve probably had a couple of them in my career, and I haven’t identified that.

He concluded, “Because there’s probably more than likely some students in my school that could probably be successful if given the opportunity. And self-reflecting, there’s probably been students previously in my building that I was unaware of and didn’t even consider.”

Subtheme: Retention vs. acceleration. A third subtheme that emerged among participants was the comparison of principals' knowledge of the research on the practice or retention versus their unfamiliarity with whole-grade acceleration. Mr. James said, "I know that we have retention [guidelines]. But as far as acceleration, I know that a document just came out, to be honest with you, but I haven't reviewed it. So it probably is in there." Mr. Allen, who had a referral for whole-grade acceleration last year, commented, "Our school system I do believe has had a very minimal worded policy on retention or acceleration. I would not be able to quote whatever is minimal. More guidance than perhaps even policy, if I'm correct." He continued,

I think what I know is that, again, it [acceleration] seems to parallel retention, but a little bit more profitable as an opportunity for a certain kind of learner. I think the research suggests that there is more of a detrimental risk in retaining a child than there is in promoting a child.

Mrs. Carson described her understanding of the process,

There is a school board policy that provides guidelines for acceleration. It's a combination of retention/acceleration. So the guidelines are similar for both in that there is a process. The process involves first of all looking at the child holistically looking at all components of their development. . . Ultimately, it's the administrator's decision as to whether or not a student is accelerated.

When asked if she knew what the research is about acceleration, Mrs. Carson said, "Can't say that I have an answer or an opinion on that one." However, she added,

I do know that the research does not support retention, just blanket support on retention, that you really need to look carefully at the students. If a student is

retained, there needs to be something in place that's going to be different than the current situation in order for it to be successful. Students who are retained have a greater likelihood of dropping out and not completing high school. Retention is more successful for students at a younger age than it is older.

Theme: Student welfare. Principals were asked to share their background knowledge about whole-grade acceleration. In analyzing and interpreting the data to develop themes, eight of the nine principals said they had not conducted any research on acceleration and four expressed a concern for students, both now and for their future outcomes.

It is important to highlight the care and dedication each principal expressed when considering the welfare of all students at his/her school. They also frequently expressed a fear for the unknown if students are accelerated. Responses revealed a concern about what might happen later to students who skip a grade. Expressing fear of the future, Mr. Allen shared,

I think it presents still too much unknown. And always somewhere very high on the list is a concern for the level of maturity of the child. While what stands out probably more often when something's going to develop as far as acceleration is the academic performance, generally it's not always a complete package. There's going to be a lagging or concern relative to size, maturity, social. So that begins to take over what could be the need to consider acceleration for academic reasons.

In considering his position on acceleration, Mr. James reflected,

I think that socially and emotionally you have to consider whether or not this is a socially and emotionally developmentally appropriate decision to make. The

thing that you have to consider is if this happens at the foundational grade levels how will it impact them later in their academic career. Because at some point in time, sometimes children plateau and even out. Their background knowledge, their exposure sometimes helps them to have the ability to present themselves as a higher learner that is ready for the next level, but it doesn't always mean that it's the best thing for them just because that maturity might not be there. All facets of their learning may not be here.

He continued his ruminations about a potential accelerant,

Is it the right thing for kids? Not necessarily because it's a bad thing, but I really truly believe in that social, emotional, developmentally appropriate piece. And so I always want to make sure that that decision is made with every piece of information that you can have to ensure success for that child. And I think just as the opposite side of things for the exceptional ed students, we don't identify students with disabilities to have a learning disability nine times out of ten until at least third grade. I feel like you have to allow for some sort of time frame to allow for growth and for children to kind of level out before you make a huge decision.

Admitting he was unaware of the research on acceleration, Mr. Roberts suggested,

I think it [whole-grade acceleration] can be a good thing if given the right environment to help them be successful later. After this conversation, I'd really like to have the opportunity to have a little bit of training on how to identify them and what are characteristics of them so that it could be made a bit more aware of them to see if there are students that are under my watch to ensure that they have

this available. But I would definitely wholeheartedly support whole-grade acceleration.

It is important to highlight the care and concern each principal expressed when considering the welfare of all students at his/her school. However, an intersection occurred between unfamiliarity about whole-grade acceleration and a comprehensive understanding that retention is not fully supported by research. In considering whole-grade acceleration, Ms. Adkins asserted,

So if we feel like they have certain skills, you don't want holes and gaps. So really just looking to see what proficiencies they have or mastery of skills, stamina, to be able to produce in that area so that you feel comfortable with moving that student to another grade.

When asked what stands out to her when she thinks about whole-grade acceleration, Mrs. Hunter noted,

Well, if we're supposed to meet a student where they are in special education, we should be doing the same thing in gifted education. And if that means that they need to be accelerated so that they're engaged and they're challenged, then that's what we need to do. But, I also feel that we can do that without doing whole-grade acceleration, and we can do that by subject area.

Interestingly, both unaware of the Iowa Acceleration Scale tool and its use with cases of whole-grade acceleration, Mrs. Carson and Mrs. Cole expressed their fears about student welfare that would have been addressed by using the IAS. Mrs. Carson did not see any logistical problems with grade skipping, but cautioned, "Other than it's a very difficult decision to make because there's not a checklist that if the child shows this and this and

this, then you know whole-grade acceleration is most appropriate.” Mrs. Cole was thoughtful in thinking about possible students and acceleration,

I think that it needs to be a situation where the family understands that acceleration is the best means to meet a child’s overall needs. A consideration might be if there is a sibling who is a year older, and then suddenly we’re talking about two siblings who would be in the same grade level. I think there are some emotional/family dynamic issues that would just need to be addressed. They wouldn’t necessarily be criteria that would make the decision the wrong decision for the child, but just would need to be considered.

Again, Mr. Vincent, who was considered for whole-grade acceleration as an elementary student, reflected,

I think on a case-by-case basis, it [whole-grade acceleration] can be exactly what the student needs to propel academically. As an administrator, I’m certainly not opposed to going through that process and moving a kid forward. I don’t believe that students will maintain a joy of learning and education if they are stagnated or if they don’t feel that their teachers are interested in their growth, if they feel like they’re being kinda squelched and not able to really grow academically. I think that you will lose them, and that’s where we get behavior and kids with low self-esteem who are actually really, really, really brilliant, but they’re not given the opportunity to show. So, on a personal level, it’s something that I’m certainly willing to consider for any student who meets the criteria.

Theme: School logistics. For the purpose of this study, school logistics refer to the detailed administration of all of the complex operations of running of schools. These

include the coordination of people, programs, resources, and facilities. In addition to this study-specific description, thematically, school logistics also refer to competing school needs that may interfere with the implementation or consideration of whole-grade acceleration.

In responding to questions seeking to learn what study participants know about whole-grade acceleration, a third theme emerged. Within the landscape of trying to meet all of his or her school's needs, principals felt the inundation of demands as building manager and instructional leader. In the landscape of 21st century public education, principals bear the weight of managing teachers, providing outstanding public relations for families and community members, continue the traditional education of students progressing grade to grade with age peers, and maintain all special programs and facilities. It is not surprising, then, that principals expressed a sense of being ill prepared to make decisions about acceleration. Mr. Roberts commented,

I think that as a society we just kind of feel like everybody needs to serve their time at certain grade levels and do the things that everybody else does. And it [whole-grade acceleration] doesn't happen very often unless you demonstrate a superior ability to be successful in the classroom.

While discussing his personal belief about whole-grade acceleration, Mr. Allen affirmed, I'm open to it only because of my own personal experience. I think we often are locked into this mindset that a six- or seven-year-old has to be in first grade, that exceptionality does exist. And, unfortunately in our constraints, public education or—we'll just say public education, our constraints with how we organize ourselves is not as open and free-flowing as it maybe needs to be.

Mr. James was comparing whole-grade acceleration to retention, but considered,

I'm gonna be honest. I don't necessarily hear as much about whole-grade acceleration as I do retention. And that's because I think the gaps in instruction that are evident in larger populations of our children present more of the priority or more of the sense of urgency. So the focus tends to be on that population versus children moving forward or whole-grade acceleration.

The institution of school creates logistical questions and Ms. Adkins said,

It's [whole-grade acceleration] not something that we're saying no, it can't happen. But I think, again, when you look at the institution of education, we feel like there needs to be a structure, and they need to go through this grade level to get to this grade level, and this is why standards are in place and this is why we have objectives. And we need to make sure that they get all of these pieces.

As a result, she suggested,

I think gifted students get ignored a lot. We are very quick to look at students who are struggling. I think we're in an age where sometimes teachers are okay with the status quo and teaching at the status quo. . . I don't know if we always focus on looking at how students learn. If we spend more time focusing on how a student learns, we could probably meet a whole lot of needs and enhance learning for a lot of kids.

Finally, Ms. Adkins expressed her concern about a lack of processes and guidelines and leadership from senior personnel. It was clear she was hesitant to make any remarks that might sound negative, but she was clear that in the past, she did not feel her position as

the leader of her school was adequately supported and that adds to the fear of considering, in this case, acceleration. She did share,

I think when that [request for whole-grade acceleration] comes there's a desire to want to know well what process, what criteria, what are we using to determine this student is capable of meeting this grade level work. What confidence do we have? I think they would want to get some leadership and guidance from their administration as well as from division personnel in order to be able to move through and feel confident in that placement.

Mr. Allen's comments echoed those of most of his colleagues,

That we're going to have people referring constantly, even if they're misguided referrals, for consideration for such to the state. . . But I think it's been fairly manageable. We probably had some, but I don't think we've had a plethora of parents and/or teachers that have just started referring because it's an option to them. I always thought before that our approach to the referral process was sort of hush-hush, that we feared. . . build it and they will come kind of thing. But to this date, I can't say that has dramatically increased.

In sharing her knowledge about whole-grade acceleration, Ms. Carter shared,

I'd probably promote whole-grade acceleration over meeting the kid's needs at the grade level, trying to expand and trying to differentiate at that grade level. I find often that the teachers are not capable or willing to accommodate the needs of that child at that grade level. . . But of course that's not based on research. That's based on my opinion and based on my frame of reference.

A final logistical situation that arose from participants was how to appropriately deal with parents and the community. As with many principals, Mr. James went back to the need for a well-conceived and articulated set of processes by saying

Well, I think that if you don't have policies and procedures in place to justify the 'why' behind the decision-making, then you open yourself up to allow anyone to have the option [of grade skipping]. You follow policy and guidelines; however, but it's not something that's hard to contend against a family or a parent about if you have the appropriate structures in place to say yes or no to the reason why it should or shouldn't be best for the child. . . justify your reasoning.

In thinking about the logistical issues that might arise if acceleration was a consideration, Ms. Adkins considered

The moment your community feels like you're open to accepting whoever that request is, you begin to get a lot of requests. . . If it's opening a can of worms, perhaps those administrators feel like they're then going to get an influx or an overflow of requests.

When asked if that has been her experience, she indicated it has not been an issue of great influx.

Research Question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

The interview protocol included many questions that were used to glean participants' personal and professional experiences with grade skipping. See Table 4 for a frequency distribution of principals' responses about their experiences with acceleration.

Table 4

Frequency Distribution for Research Question 2: Professional/Personal Experiences with Acceleration

Response	# Occurrences
No personal experiences	8
Does not come up often/not advertised	7
No requests for whole-grade acceleration last 3 years	5
All students must be lock-step with age peers	4
Influence of lack of support from leadership	4
School focus is on low-performing over gifted	3
If student is bigger/taller/more mature	2
Better to move ahead and then bring back	1

It was unexpected to find only Mr. Vincent had personal experience with being considered for whole-grade acceleration. Ultimately, Mr. Vincent’s mother was clearly against it for family reasons, but he remembered the experience fondly. No other principal knew of any friend or family member for whom this option was considered.

From their professional experiences, collectively, the nine principals had a total of five requests for whole-grade acceleration in the last three years. Consistently, responses emerged that reflected both unfamiliarity and few experiences with grade skipping from which to make informed conclusions. In other words, little experience combined with very little background knowledge set the stage for themes to emerge related to student welfare and school logistics.

The interview protocol provided varied questions to gather information about their experiences with acceleration as well as other interventions. The primary comparison was with the practice of retention. Another pattern emerged with principals

not having sufficient human resources to consult with regards to grade skipping. This is just another layer to unfamiliarity.

Theme: Limited experiences with acceleration. The transcripts provided ample evidence of the unfamiliarity principals have with whole-grade acceleration. This was more fully analyzed in research question 1. Many interview questions solicited participants' background knowledge. Many discussed their interactions with fellow principals and the responses were similar. Mrs. Hunter remarked, "I haven't really had too many discussions [with principals]. It hasn't come up much. There's been more discussion about retention than whole-grade acceleration in my experience." She continued,

I haven't had any experience with it because it doesn't happen when they get to middle school. So as a teacher for 11 years, I never had a student who had been accelerated at the middle school level. At least it doesn't happen very often. I don't know much about the research. I could only assume that it would be positive for those students who really need it because they're really not challenged in a regular class. I could see where it's positive from an academic standpoint, but there are some challenges with the social/emotional aspect of it. . .

When Mr. Vincent received a request for whole-grade acceleration last year, he reached out to five other principals and commented,

Actually, many of the responses were, 'I haven't done it before.' Many principals that I spoke with hadn't had that experience before. They've had experiences on the other end, retention, but not as much with whole-grade acceleration. So the students that they were about to do it with were extremely high students, but it

didn't seem as though the process was as strong. It seemed more of a kind of school-based decision based on observations, anecdotal type things, and less of a clear, specific, refined process.

In the past three years, Mrs. Cole has had zero referrals for grade skipping. However, she added,

Honestly, I can't think right off the top of my head the last time I was involved in an acceleration decision which would have necessitated that conversation [with a principal]. It's been several years. And again, when the issue has come up, it has been a very individual decision in the sense that we carefully considered all of the factors and ultimately what could we do as a school do to meet that child's needs.

She considered,

Could we meet that child's needs about their current grade level assignment if for social, emotional, or other reasons we felt like accelerating them would put them in a situation that was not developmentally appropriate?

Most principals had very thoughtful responses about their practical experiences with acceleration. Ms. Carter reflected, "I'm vaguely familiar with [guidelines], but I don't have a lot of experience with it." Similarly, Mrs. Hunter said, "It wasn't something I'd ever thought about, honestly. . . So that was my very first experience with a request for acceleration. It's just not something I've had any experience with." A similar comment came from Mr. Vincent when discussing possible reluctance to consider acceleration, "Only that it's so uncommon that it's territory that we may hesitate to go in because we think, oh, you know, we can just differentiate a little bit more." Mr. James indicated,

I'll be honest, it doesn't come up much. It wasn't in my career. We talk about differentiation so much that unless it's a blaring thing to say, wow, this student really could benefit from whole-grade acceleration that's not our first go-to. Our first go-to are other interventions and ways to support through tapping into different resources and different modes of learning.

Principals' body language conveyed a genuine interest in meeting students' needs; however, responses communicated frustration when the interview questions required specificity about using whole-grade acceleration. Several participants said they wanted more support or guidance from central office and senior leadership since whole-grade acceleration has not often been something requested. Ms. Adkins shared her experience, "I've tried to work through [central office personnel] to kinda get some guidance as far as making sure I'm not overstepping any bounds or crossing any guidelines or doing something that I shouldn't be doing." With minimal practical experience in going through the process of a request for acceleration, Mr. Allen, a veteran principal of 20 years, summarized,

Yeah, because you develop a bank of experiences that you fall back on. You can't help it, and you need that. Every situation will be different, but there are patterns and pieces of the process that were learned through going through that hopefully would benefit the next case. If I had had five [whole-grade acceleration cases] and all five were unsuccessful, I still need to be professional and open-minded about my approach, as I said earlier. Five for five have been bad, that sixth case, it could still end up being the right thing to do for that child. I would

hope that the experiences still leave anyone open-minded and respectful to trying to reach the best decision possible with all that can be brought together.

Theme: Student welfare. The theme of student welfare emerged after multiple analyses of the transcripts. Eight principals had no personal experience with whole-grade acceleration and five had not received a request for its consideration in the last three years. They did not possess a bank of experiences or knowledge from which to understand student outcomes. As a result, fear for the welfare for students was expressed within a context of limited knowledge about the intervention.

The interview protocol was developed to solicit rich and deep responses about their professional experiences and, due to their relative unfamiliarity with the intervention, many responses communicated concern for students. In reality, seven principals noted that whole-grade acceleration does not come up often and four believe that all students should remain with their age-peers. An abundance of caution was exhibited in participants' body language and facial expressions which made it clear that they are dedicated to the welfare of all students, academically, socially, and emotionally. Mr. James began,

I think that if it is in the best interest of the child, I don't think that it's something that we shouldn't do. But I also think that you have to really weigh out all of the pieces to determine whether it's the best thing. It's not something that you can just make a whim decision on. I don't know that that would be my first go-to thing to do. It's not my first thing to do. But if everything is right for that child, I think you need to do what's best for them. And if that's what it calls for, you should do what's best.

Mr. Allen shared,

We have to try to force ourselves to still be open-minded about what are opportunities for kids. Acceleration is one. It should never come off the table. It shouldn't necessarily be the go-to; there should be a variety of things that we try to consider to meet the needs much like, again, retention isn't always the way to go.

Mrs. Hunter is a second-year principal who had two whole-grade acceleration requests in her first year. She described how she would address any acceleration request she received,

I try to get as much information as possible from the parents as to why they're requesting it. . . My experience has only been with really young students who would be in kindergarten or first grade. . . I would be in touch with that school [for documentation]. Start with that and see if it's worth pursuing. And probably if there's a parent request, I would have to pursue it anyway unless it's just blatant that it's not warranted.

Mrs. Hunter did not elaborate on what would make a request unwarranted from her standpoint. It seemed she wanted to ensure there was process that would allow a principal to decline a parent request. Mr. James, who would always consider a request for acceleration reflected,

But again, I go back to that social, emotional, developmentally, and then are all phases of their academics supportive of needing an accelerated option. A lot of times the answer is "no" because we can delve into skills that need to be broadened and strengthened more than what the service layers provided

information on. I have had teachers ask me is it an option. It's always an option. It's never off the table, but you have to look at all facets of the whole child in order to make the decision.

Mr. Vincent thought back to his case from the year before and said,

I'm referring back to the same student last year. The teacher was very adamant from early on that this student was heads and shoulders above other students in academics, as well as maturity and critical thinking, just global view of the world, and vocabulary. . . Though reluctant, because again this is a process that doesn't happen very much, so it was always coming to mind, oh, this is what I think about this kid, but I don't know. Let me show you what this kid wrote, but, you know, I don't know. . . But reluctant simply because she just didn't know how it would all pan out having not experienced it before.

Mr. Allen is the other principal to have had a case of whole-grade acceleration last year.

He reflected,

My experience has been fairly reasonable. . . I keep getting driven back to the retention piece. . . And I think that generally speaking, while there have been some bumps in the road, it has proven to be the reasonably correct thing to do. It never hits on all cylinders. If there was a concern about maturity or social dynamics, it played out that it continued on as a concern and needed to be facilitated and managed by the parent. But along academic lines, I think it has done what it needed to do. I think the only detractor ends up being the social piece.

Interestingly, this accelerant has been fine socially. Other than the receiving teacher being somewhat disinclined to have a child skip a grade, within a few weeks the student had assimilated quite well academically, socially, and emotionally.

Theme: School logistics. For this study, school logistics refer to the myriad operations related to the running of schools, including the coordination of people, programs, resources, and facilities. This study-specific description of logistics emerged thematically during the interpretation of the transcripts. School logistics also include the myriad competing school needs.

Principals were asked many questions about their experiences with whole-grade acceleration. As has been stated earlier, there was a dearth of experiences, both personal and professional. In analyzing the data, school logistics emerged as a theme for research question 2. Seven principals cited that the intervention is not a common topic of conversation and is not advertised to families and the community. Four participants noted a lack of senior leadership support and three shared that their focus on students who are under-performing captures their time and attention. Finally, four participants shared their belief that students need to remain with age-peers in the “lock step” notion of public education.

As principals discussed their experiences and a variety of competing school needs emerged. Logistically, participants conveyed the difficulty in balancing the varied needs within their schools as leader and manager of every resource and program. Subthemes emerged related to the running of schools: leadership, teacher and parent variables, emphasis on low-performing students, as well as the impact of the current state of 21st public education in the United States.

Subtheme: Principal leadership. In describing her experiences with seeking input to make informed decisions about acceleration, Ms. Adkins shared her desire for greater assistance since she was, at the time, a first-year principal. Her comments captured sentiments of more than one of her colleagues. She shared,

I tried that [seeking help from central office]. I don't know if I necessarily felt like I got a lot of direction. So I considered what it looks like for child study when we make decisions for studies in a child study plan. We try to pull together our specialists and our experts to get a good read of where that student is so that it's not me making a single decision. . . And I guess I've kind of created my own process. I wanted to feel like the people who were involved had good knowledge of why we did what we did and that we could feel comfortable with it. . . And if for some reason we really feel like that student is not making it, we could realistically pull back.

She held the position that if the grade skipping did not work out, a student could be re-assigned to the original age-peer grade.

Principal leadership emerged during my multiple reviews of the transcripts. Several principals' leadership was captured in the transcripts. Mrs. Cole was asked about her philosophy of educating gifted students and she responded, "I would say that I have a philosophy on educating students." She was keen to be inclusive of all student populations and she endeavors to meet students' individual differences to provide differentiated learning opportunities. She shared, "I don't think our responsibilities to gifted students are any different than our responsibilities to students who are special education or fall in some other tier of needing intervention. I think it's our responsibility

to address individual needs.” She indicated a general philosophy of education that does not differentiate by student population or individualized needs.

I was impressed that second year principal, Mrs. Hunter, arranged for professional development for her staff in understanding the social and emotional needs of high-ability students. She had a school improvement plan goal to increase the pass advanced scores on the end of course state tests. She said,

So instead of focusing on some of the lower levels to make sure we were reaching some of our level students as well. But she [professional development presenter] talked more about things like how the students feel that can sometimes slip through the cracks.

And Mr. Roberts was the one principal who, after having participated in the study district interview, was interested in pursuing this topic further. He shared,

After this conversation, I’d really like to have the opportunity to have a little bit of training [on acceleration] to be a little bit more aware of them to see if there are students that are under my watch to ensure that they have this available.

Subtheme: Low-performing students. Each of the nine elementary schools in the study district has a different profile of diversity in its student population. Regardless of the make-up of the school’s student enrollment, each principal discussed the challenge he/she faces on a daily basis to meet the needs of low-performing students and still consider the needs of high-ability learners. Principals appeared to be genuine in body language and they endeavored to capture the frustration they feel in juggling myriad and competing school demands. Research question 2 sought to learn about the experiences participants had with whole-grade acceleration and they shared that while they had few

experiences their focus was on low-performing students. Three principals specifically addressed this competing school need.

Ms. Adkins provided the following insight:

I think gifted students get ignored a lot. We are very quick to look at students who are struggling. I think we're in an age where sometimes teachers are okay with the status quo and teaching at the status quo. I don't think we necessarily have a good handle on what differentiation is or how to sometimes be able to challenge our students who are at an upper level or who are capable of being able to be engaged or to enhance their learning. I just don't feel like that's always a focus that we place on education. . . If we spent more time focusing on how a student learns, we could probably meet a whole lot of needs and enhance learning for a lot of kids.

Ms. Carter acknowledged,

So often with high-stakes testing, the emphasis is on the students that are not performing well. A lot of time and energy and resources are taken with the students that need to move forward from that bottom 25%. So my personal philosophy is sometimes the top 5%, top 1% are forgotten people that I think are a special group of kids that need more devotion and time given to their special set of qualities. So, with that said, I really would like to develop more energy and time to meeting their needs.

Mr. Roberts works in a Title I school that is 65% free and reduced-price lunch. Within that context I found several of Mr. Roberts' responses revealed a concern about the "what ifs" in his decision-making. He wondered whether he was more knowledgeable of

whole-grade acceleration if that would that make a difference? He shared the following about his student population,

Well, there's potential in a couple of the kids that I have now that I know could potentially be successful. And if I could place blame, I think that my experience, the places that I've served as principal, we focus more on the lower-performing students and never really look at the gifted students as to making sure that we meet their needs.

In discussing what Ms. Carter knows about the research on whole-grade acceleration,

The research, not necessarily as much, especially for gifted students specifically. I think that here at the elementary level we spend more time than I'm comfortable with on retention. And we really don't flip that coin as much to the other side. And so we're looking kind of at if you're smart or if you're gifted, you're okay and don't require my attention. It's you all that lower that standard, or lower than where you should be that requires the attention, and so you get the intervention, and you get the resources.

She was asked to describe the types of professional development opportunities the study district provided regarding gifted education or whole-grade acceleration. She stated,

Whole-grade acceleration, I can't think of any that I've been exposed to. And if I have, I didn't select. Unfortunately, my frame of reference is getting the overall pass rate. So I focus a lot of energy on the students that are not doing well. So I haven't taken a lot of the opportunities.

Mr. James added,

I'm gonna be honest. I don't necessarily hear as much about whole-grade acceleration as I do retention. And that's because I think the gaps in instruction that are evident in larger populations of our children present more of the priority or more of the sense of urgency. So, the focus tends to be on the population versus children moving forward or whole-grade acceleration. You have less of those children than you do others.

Ms. Carter continued, "However, many feel that it's a leg up for students. Why spend all of this time in class and in school when you can move through a little faster to move forward with completing and continuing your education." With the focus on so many varied student needs, Mr. Vincent echoed,

So, with regards to the education of our gifted students, I think that differentiation is extremely important so that they, too, feel as though I'm learning, I'm gaining, and I'm increasing my knowledge rather than using school as a maintenance.

Subtheme: Teacher and parent involvement variables. Principals were asked to discuss conversations they have had with teachers related to whole-grade acceleration. Few had taken place; however, participants had quite a few insights related to the teacher and parent variables and whether grade skipping is considered.

Mrs. Carson and Ms. Carter were the only two principals who considered that whole-grade acceleration would make it easier on teachers not having to differentiate or need to meet the needs of students who have the cognitive capacity for the next grade level. Ms. Carter was prepared to consider acceleration because "it is a better avenue to achieve academic success for the student rather than keeping them at the grade level and asking the teacher to differentiate for that one child." She continued,

I find often that the teachers are not capable or willing to accommodate the needs of that child at that grade level. But of course, that's not based on research.

That's based on my opinion and based on my frame of reference.

In answering what stands out to her about whole-grade acceleration, Ms. Carter said,

Probably just the opposition from some of the teachers. . . So automatically I think that teachers worry about how to meet the needs of these students, and am I going to get parent feedback saying, hey, you're not doing enough to meet this accelerated kid's needs."

When discussing the logistical issues with whole-grade acceleration, Mr. Allen reflected on the bias of teachers,

Like anything else, timelines, time, pulling the resources and the people together. . . My experience is that sometimes people come to the table with predetermined decisions. . . Teachers, and I suppose administrators, can often come to the table already rooted in their mindset about what has to be. It can be perceived by teachers and others that their opinions weren't valued.

Like Ms. Adkins, Mr. Allen articulated a concern that while teachers should be looking for opportunities for gifted learners to enrich and extend beyond the traditional curriculum, he cautioned,

And a teacher has to be careful not to be drawn into teaching to the middle.

That's going to happen; it's a reality. But a concerted effort and a conscious effort needs to be made to knowing what those children within the traditional curriculum and beyond that to keep them motivated and excited and enticed about learning.

He also captured a poignant logistical point in describing who might be involved in considering whole-grade acceleration. He remarked, “Really anyone that we’ve deemed that has been meaningfully involved with that child. It could be a reading specialist, although I doubt it because our reading specialists are more involved with the retention aspect of our interventions.”

The parent involvement variable captured the attention of nearly all principals. Parents often communicate to principals that their child(ren) need more than what the general classroom teacher provides. In pursuing acceleration, Mr. James said, “Sometimes it’s prompted by parents because they don’t feel like their children are being challenged enough because maybe they’re reading at a higher level than their same-age peers.” However, she expressed her fear of a student accelerating, thinking “we can delve into skills that need to be broadened and strengthened more than what the service layers provided information on.” Similarly, Mr. Vincent suggested parents may not have the same understanding of the education system and shared, “I also think that sometimes what the parents think and what the data show can be very different. Parents could be adamant about moving forward one way based on what they observe of their child. And they want decisions made without regard to how the data speak.”

One concern principals had was if whole-grade acceleration is advertised and promoted that there would be a huge influx of parent requests. However, no principal indicated that that had yet happened. Mrs. Hunter was concerned that “not having a specific policy to reference” makes working with families different. She said,

I’m sure it’s people worried that it sets a precedent and then any parent can ask that their child be accelerated. . . because parents talk to other parents. And then

you know you're going to receive additional requests. And you're going to have to have justification for either accepting or denying that.

As one of the two principals who had a case of acceleration that used district guidelines and the Iowa Acceleration Scale, he still had some perceptions that did not fit with his recent experience. He said,

I guess the question gets at the conversations and interactions you have with the parent. You hope, like with the teachers, you're going to be open-minded and respectful towards the process that we're going to put in place and that the process will reveal a decent credibility about what seems to be the best thing to do for the child. But I can't say that's necessarily always going to be the case because parents will have their mind set, their blinkers on. Hard to argue when it gets to the point where the parent says, 'I know my child best.' It's sort of an educational decision that exists within the school walls. It can get quite difficult to work through things with parents.

Like with Mrs. Carson, Mr. Allen concluded that if the school committee does not recommend acceleration, "it's a hard position to not ultimately acquiesce to the parent's wishes. . . Both processes [retention or acceleration] are really left up to the parents." That is not the case of the study district's policy or guidelines.

Subtheme: Gifted education within the landscape of 21st century public education. Another aspect of the overarching school logistics theme was the influence and impact of public education and the age of accountability. Table 4 reflects principal responses related to their experiences. Seven principals mentioned that whole-grade acceleration is not a common topic of conversation or discussion in schools and four

pointed out that public education in the United States had the tradition of being “lock step” where every student has to progress from grade to grade in the same manner.

Study participants often shared views of public education and its notion of equality, or sameness, for all students. There was a general belief that students should stay with their age peers and that acceleration would upset that lock-step notion of school—of going from one grade to the next grade until matriculation. Mr. Allen summed it up, “And unfortunately in our constraints, public education or—we’ll just say public education, our constraints with how we organize ourselves is not as open and free-flowing as it may need to be.” He had talked about some progressive instructional ideas he had implemented throughout his teacher career, but ended by saying,

I think what just sticks out in my mind is that we have to try to force ourselves to still be open-minded about what are opportunities for kids. Acceleration is one.

It should never come off the table. It shouldn’t necessarily be the go-to.

He went on to say that any number of interventions are considered before grade skipping. He called whole-grade acceleration one of the most serious interventions and it sounded that any option should be considered before grade skipping. Acceleration is not the norm in public education.

Interestingly, this same principal was very thoughtful and perceptive when he discussed the role of professional development in training staff in issues related to gifted education. He was eager to do more in this area, “But I think the gifted and talented department is in competition with so many others to find time. It’s always a matter of time.” So, when asked if any professional development had been offered on whole-grade acceleration, he said, “No. We’ve more dealt with it as it’s come along.”

Mrs. Hunter and Mr. Roberts provided insight on the nature of school. Mr. Roberts had one student considered for subject-based acceleration and he shared, "What we've run into this year with that is that the subject areas offered at each grade levels don't line up. So the whole master schedule is a huge issue that we have to work through in order to provide that to our identified student." In addition to the importance of school leadership in being proactive in scheduling grade levels and gifted services, Mrs. Hunter also focused on the importance of students being assimilated into the school structure. She had two students who were accelerated and I asked about teacher attitude. She indicated the teachers were good with the decision; however,

It's not just academics, but it's learning school routines and procedures and just what's okay in school versus home or preschool. So there was a bit of a learning curve there. . . And the teacher was fine with it once she [the accelerant] had the routines and things down. She's gotta learn how to sit on the rug, crisscross applesauce, she has to learn how to walk in a line, and that kinda thing. She just had to remind herself a lot because kindergarten sets a foundation.

Logistically, many study participants referenced the current landscape of 21st century public education. Mr. Roberts said, "I think that as a society we just kind of feel like everybody needs to serve their time at certain grade levels and do the things that everybody else does." Mrs. Carson added,

there have been times when teachers have said to me this child belongs in such-and-such a grade. But when we look at the process and really look at the child, the child's needs can be met in the appropriate grade level. I've had students as a

teacher who were accelerated and the social factors were quite a challenge for the child.

The lock step notion of public education was summarized by Mr. Vincent when he recalled his thoughts as a classroom teacher,

I realized, wow, there really are some kids that are above where they are, but simply because of the necessary sequence of school, they're being held back, brought down to the standards where they were already far above and beyond.

He wondered, "When you have a student that has all of those skills already, why are they here?"

Research Question 3: What training in gifted education do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

This research question was included in this study because I was interested to learn to what extent principals have had training in gifted education, and, more specifically, professional development related to whole-grade acceleration. Knowing that principals are required to attend ongoing training on topics related to special education, I wanted to know if there was a balance in gifted training. Upon review of all of the transcripts, what emerged was actually a dearth of training options principals have had or chosen to select. Table 5 clearly underscores an absence of training in acceleration.

Table 5

Frequency Distribution for Research Question 3: Training in Acceleration

Response	# Occurrences
None	9

Many have participated in professional development about topics on gifted education, but no one had completed any training on whole-grade acceleration. While two principals, Mr. Allen and Mr. Vincent, have had cases of acceleration that used guidelines developed from the Office of Gifted Education, that included the Iowa Acceleration Scale tool, they had no formal training. Two themes emerged: lack of training and a focus on low-performing students.

Theme: Absence of training. Mrs. Hunter shared, “I don’t really know of anything that the district offers, honestly. . . I don’t know of any professional development opportunities in house.” When asked about any professional development specific to acceleration, she continued,

No. And I’ve been with the district, including my time as a teacher, since 2006.

So eleven years and I’ve never seen any PD on that. Or, honest as a teacher either I never saw any PD for gifted education. I’ve always seen a ton on special education, but not gifted.

In addition, Mr. Vincent noted, “Professional development regarding gifted education is provided specifically to those teachers that are gifted resource teachers.” Mr. Roberts shared, “Since I’ve been here in this division we probably get quarterly training on the process, the policy, and the practices of the division. . . But then whole-grade acceleration, none.” As a veteran educator, Mrs. Cole poignantly said, “I’ve had various short-term training opportunities over the course of my 23-year teaching career. However, I do not remember the specifics of any one training session.”

On the other hand, while Ms. Carter was aware of training modules, she admitted, “The district and actually [the Office of Gifted Education] have provided opportunities. I

just haven't taken advantage of them. I see them come through and just haven't taken advantage of them." Mrs. Carson continued,

It was many, many years ago. It was professional development on identifying gifted learners and distinguishing between students that might be hardworking students as opposed to gifted learners and strategies to use that are more effective for instructing students that are gifted.

More recently, she remarked that professional development opportunities exist, but

To my knowledge, it's not mandatory that anyone attend. But oftentimes when we have professional development and there are options for gifted and talented instruction, I do know that if I request it, I'm sure that things would be done at the building level.

However, when I inquired about any needs her school had for gifted training, she responded, "At this time, no."

As a principal who has had acceleration requests but felt she was provided sufficient assistance, Ms. Adkins said,

I feel from the gifted education piece we've been given several opportunities. . . . I don't know we've had as much dialogue or offerings with regards to acceleration. And it's not to say that's not something that's being worked on. Maybe because it's not something that gets brought up often it's not considered a priority.

In addition, Mr. James shared this about his experiences,

Yes, through the division I have had training. Not necessarily assigned directly to me as a principal, but I always participated in gifted—or in any professional

development that I ask my teachers to go through, I participate in the professional development, if I'm able to. And so I have training through that, as well as how to assess, identify. So the identification process. I've been through training for that. . . Anything like that, that's been the extent of my training.

With regards to professional development on whole-grade acceleration, he concluded, "I would think I would know about that. I don't know about it."

On the other hand, Mr. Vincent, responding to training as an administrator, considered,

I'd say vicariously, kind of piece by piece. Not necessarily days or professional development devoted specifically to gifted instruction, but certainly embedded in other types of professional development. Other topics? Student placement. Creating classrooms. Placing gifted students appropriately with peers that may not be labeled gifted. Reviewing assessments that are given for gifted identification. Differentiation of instruction for those students. How to provide feedback to teachers of the gifted. I think that about sums it up.

Theme: Training is focused on low-performing students. Table 4 captures principal responses about their experiences with whole-grade acceleration. A common theme that emerged was a focus on low-performing students. These students become a priority and a real competing school need for principals to manage. Three principals specifically referenced a focus on under-achieving students. As a result, their professional development choices more related to meeting the needs of below grade level and special education students.

To sum up the majority of participants' viewpoints, Ms. Carter articulated,

Whole-grade acceleration [training], I can't think of any that I've been exposed to. And if I have, I didn't select. Unfortunately, my frame of reference is getting the overall pass rate up. So, I focus a lot of energy on the students that are not doing well. So, I haven't taken a lot of the opportunities.

Research Question 4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

Given the totality of interview transcripts, it was not unexpected that the smallest data set was associated with the perceived benefits of whole-grade acceleration. Table 6 presents a frequency distribution of principals' perceived benefits of acceleration. Collectively, principals came up with nine possible benefits (as compared with 25 perceived challenges/liabilities). It is interesting to note that only five of the nine principals stated one benefit they listed in common was an opportunity for gifted students. Responses were underwhelming, but are consistent within the context of lack of knowledge and experience with grade skipping. As a result of multiple reviews of the transcripts, themes of student welfare and school logistics emerged. Each theme is further discussed in this section.

Table 6

Frequency Distribution for Research Question 4 – Benefits of Acceleration

Response	# Occurrences
Opportunity for gifted students	5
Academic	3
Easier for teachers	3
Address gifted students' needs	2
Engage/motivate students	2
Provide challenge	2
Students not “stuck” in school	1
Sends positive message to community	1
1 step closer to college	1

Theme: Student welfare. Seven of the nine principals’ listed benefits related to student welfare. The first theme to emerge was overwhelmingly about participants’ concern for students. Most of the benefits were student-centric. Table 6 reflects that in addition to grade skipping being a good opportunity for gifted students, three considered it an academic benefit. Less reported were two principals believing whole-grade acceleration addresses their needs and may help keep them motivated. Ms. Carter was the only principal to mention that grade skipping allows a student to get one year closer to attending college.

Interestingly, all principals considered the primary benefit to be an opportunity for students, not necessarily academic, social, or emotional. It is possible that because so few have experienced students who were accelerated they cannot speak to its many benefits. While principals listed possible benefits, there was an under tone of fear for student welfare. For example, Mrs. Carson shared possible benefits socially as she remembered one accelerant, “She had a little perky personality, so social interactions were a little strained for her without being accelerated. She found a friend. She wasn’t

ostracized by any stretch of the imagination. And she did have peer friendships.” I wanted to clarify that she did not suffer any more greatly having been accelerated and she answered, “Yes.”

What Mr. Roberts perceived to be a benefit was “I just see the overall benefit is meeting the academic needs of the students to ensure that they’re successful, being challenged, and they’re growing every day in their academic areas.” Similarly, Mrs. Hunter said, “The increased confidence and self-esteem. That’s the main one that I can think of right off the top of my head. Just in general being challenged and engaged on a regular basis, hopefully, in class. That’s the hope.” However, she interjected her concern with whole-grade acceleration saying, “I’d consider it if it’s what’s best for the child. I don’t think that it’s something that every student can do for various reasons. But I do think that if it is something that’s best for the child, it should be something that’s considered.”

In thinking about potential benefits of grade skipping, Mr. James shared, I think the benefit would be you’re meeting a need through a means to support a child. . . The other thing is that it shows that you’re willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that a child gets the support and the education that’s going to build them to their optimal success.

Though Mrs. Cole has not had any referrals for whole-grade acceleration, she thoughtfully contemplated the impact on students by suggesting,

Again, I think it is an option that we must consider when we are doing our due diligence to meet a child’s individual needs. There are children for whom that is the right decision, just like there are children for whom retention is the right

decision. Beyond just meeting a child's individual needs and, again, not just academically but whole child. A happier child probably helps to make for a happier family in those cases.

Similarly, Ms. Adkins was also clearly committed to providing the best possible school experience for students. While considering benefits she shared,

I think the whole concept of not placing people in a box but blowing that box up, I mean, when it comes to the idea of being innovative, creative opportunities – I mean those are some of the words that immediately come to mind. But when you allow students who have a vision, who have a desire to explore things, to really be able to do that, some really awesome answers can come. I think we're constantly trying to answer things in this world and figure out and come to resolution or solutions. And I think when we give kids that opportunity or people that opportunity to be able to really let loose and explore, sometimes we can come up with some really great answers.

Ms. Carter and Mr. Allen summarized what many of the participants maintained: that they are in total commitment to the well-being of students. Unfortunately, due to unfamiliarity with whole-grade acceleration, principals may elect to err on "better safe than sorry." Ms. Carter reflected,

I'd like to think that whole-grade acceleration gets them one step closer to going to college earlier and achieving his life-long goals. It's funny, though. I don't know if you've ever read the book called *The Outliers* [by Malcolm Gladwell]? In that book, they do a study on IQ. It was really interesting. According to the study, IQ doesn't necessarily guarantee success, that it has to come with other

intrinsic factors as motivation, the resources available to that person. So I thought that was very fascinating.

With over twenty years as a principal, Mr. Allen concluded that grade skipping

That it's the right thing to do for the child. But, we never really know. And we're so time-constricted with knowing if we're successful with what we do.

You want to know as quickly as you can that it was the right thing to do, but it takes time. And while I'm saying the one we worked through last year is successful this year, it might not be successful next year.

Theme: School logistics. For this study-specific description of school logistics, thematically this idea referred to the complex operations of running of schools and resource allocation. In addition, logistics are related to the ever-present competing school needs. School logistics emerged as a theme in an unusual way. While principals were asked to list potential benefits, in the absence of experience, they often segued into sharing the practical realities in schools, as well as the potential challenges to whole-grade acceleration. The evidence provided below was not conceivable to be included in Table 6 that listed the compiled list of benefits.

When answering questions about benefits and acceleration, some responses centered on the varying logistics of running schools in the 21st century. Ms. Adkins conceptualized the current educational landscape in many schools,

We call it "graveyard seating." We're in the 21st century, but you walk into classrooms and it looks like the 16th, the 15th century. You still have that schoolhouse concept of rows and lecture and taking notes. Us being able to move away from that idea because it's not the best way of being able to reach children.

Every once in a while, perhaps, we maybe need a little bit of lecture and whole-group instruction, but that worries me when you look at the institution of education, and some of the traditions that have carried out and continued that we've not been able to necessarily pull away from. And then when you look at other countries, and sometimes even here in the states, those that have given more of a freedom and flexibility with that opportunity of being able to learn and some of the outcomes that are coming with that, it's worth us taking time to be able to see why and what happens with that. The teachers who take that opportunity to allow that to happen within their classrooms, you see a completely different experience that happens for kids.

She articulated the potential for student growth and engagement when school is a place for innovation and inspired instruction. Whole-grade acceleration is one educational option that can meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of gifted students.

Several principals described the conflict between high-ability learners' needs and classroom teachers' inability to meet the needs of all their diverse learners. Ms. Carter and Mrs. Carson both focused their attention on the benefits of acceleration, while also acknowledging other competing demands. Many spoke about the influence of teachers on instruction. Ms. Carter shared,

Again, I think the whole-grade acceleration is a better avenue to achieve academic success for the student rather than keeping them at the grade level and asking that teacher to differentiate for that one child. I think sometimes our differentiation strategies or methods still don't meet the needs of that child. We fall short of

challenging that young man. So, I think the whole-grade acceleration is a better avenue for achieving the academic stimulation that child desires.

When asked about benefits, Mrs. Carson added,

I think if a child really has a high level of intelligence, we want the child to be challenged. And this is certainly not a reason to or not to, but I think for classroom teachers sometimes it can be a challenge for a child who is so far advanced to differentiate everything.

When probed for additional benefits, she echoed,

No, no. I think if the child could benefit from it. In the school setting, and again, I don't want this to sound selfish because this isn't about really the teachers and making instruction for them. But I think definitely if the child is with their peers who are performing at the same ability level, I do think it makes it easier for the teachers to provide instruction.

Mr. Roberts said the overall benefit for students is meeting their academic needs so they “are successful, being challenged, and they're growing every day in their academic areas.” Interestingly, he also addressed the benefits to teachers,

And then probably on the teacher side is once this is implemented or put into practice, we tend to focus on the lower-performing students. I think this will bring into the spotlight the need to address those highest students. So more of a global picture of how to address the students that are performing at the higher levels. So I think that's a positive as well. . . I think there's a positive message to the community that could be gleaned that we are addressing and there is a process

to meet the needs of all students whether they are high performers or low performers.

Another compelling argument about a possible benefit of whole-grade acceleration emerged out of the rigidity of public education. There is a notion in the United States that somehow children should remain in lock step with their age peers. Mr. Vincent shared the following insight to compete against this idea,

Students have an understanding that school can be catered to me and school can be catered to what I can do academically. I don't have to just sit here and learn this just because everyone else is. If I do well, then people will understand that perhaps I can do more, and that's a consideration that I can have. Just knowing that is an option for me if I continue to work hard. I don't have to be in this place forever, but there's another option for me if I continue to display my knowledge.

Research Question 5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

The final research question was included to glean from principals what they considered to be challenges associated with grade skipping. The questions were sometimes edited to change the language from “liabilities” to “challenges”. As the interviews continued, I began to think that due to an overall unfamiliarity with whole-grade acceleration, principals could not necessarily consider real challenges they had experienced with accelerants; rather, they were expressing their perceptions or “what ifs” if grade skipping occurs. In fact, principals created a cumulative list of 25 potential challenges (versus 9 benefits included in research question 4). Study participants’ responses to the interview questions fell into two themes: student welfare and school

logistics. Many perceived challenges about whole-grade acceleration were shared by principals.

Table 7

Frequency Distribution for Research Question 5 – Challenges/Liabilities of Acceleration

Response	# Principal Occurrences
Fear of future/outcomes	9
Social/emotional concerns	8
Lack of available processes/guidelines	7
Focus is on low-performing students	4
All students need to do same grade after grade	4
Immaturity	3
Perception of elitism	3
Not advertised as an option	3
Teacher acceptance	3
Physical size	2
Students may “level out”	3
Student struggles with acceptance	2
Parents	2
Transition to middle school	2
Personal bias	2
Concern for student welfare	2
Fear of missing students who would benefit from grade skipping	2
Differentiate instead of whole-grade acceleration	2
Student being bullied	1
Opposition from teachers	1
Physical safety	1
Suicide risks	1
Meeting student needs	1
Takes time to know if right intervention	1
Being wrong	1

Theme: Student welfare. Of the 25 challenges compiled by principals, 14 were directly related to a concern for student welfare. Table 7 presents the comprehensive list

of challenges or liabilities to acceleration reported by participants. All principals worried about future outcomes and eight expressed concerns about the social and emotional impact on accelerants. Other listed concerns were student immaturity, size of the student, self-esteem worries, issues of bullying, safety, and worry about suicide.

Principals expressed concern for the potential negative effects of whole-grade acceleration on students. The study district has very committed, dedicated elementary principals who feel and expressed deep commitment and responsibility for their students, wanting to make the best decisions for them. This caring cadre of administrators shared many poignant reflections. Interestingly, two principals, Mr. Roberts and Mrs. Carson, considered it a liability if they were to miss someone who should accelerate. Mrs. Carson said,

That we didn't accelerate a student who truly was capable of handling the acceleration and for whatever reason we opted not to and the next year we encountered similar situations of boredom, frustration, and effect of hating, not wanting to come to school, not being challenged.

Mr. Allen expressed concern about the decision to grade skip a student as follows, Being wrong. Even with the best intentions it turned out to be the wrong thing to do. We always sort of put on the table that when we retained, if we're wrong there's still the opportunity to graduate and move forward. When you promote, when you accelerate, if you're wrong you don't want to get into the business, unless it magically works for everybody that it didn't work and you're going backwards. That's a worry. So far, we really haven't had that to deal with, but that sticks out in my mind.

This principal was also concerned about the social impact on a student who might skip a grade. From his experience the previous year, he elaborated,

The maturation piece, it proved to be a little bit more difficult for the child to pick up on the social cues of the eight, nine-year-old was like versus the six- or seven-year-old that the child was. Ultimately, I have heard stories about them into middle school that physical size continued to lag and the child sort of stood out.

However, according to his own interview responses, the student who skipped a grade took very little time to adjust socially.

Mrs. Hunter considered the longitudinal impact on students. Feeling the weight of decision-making, she remarked,

You're making a decision that's going to change a child's life for the rest of their life. You're impacting the next 13 years if it's kindergarten, first through 12th grade and college. So I just think it's a huge responsibility. I guess it's a liability. I'm trying to think of how to word it. I think of it more as just a huge responsibility because you're shaping someone's entire future. And if you make the wrong choice and that child is not successful, that would be the thing that I would worry about, what have I done to that child's self-esteem or confidence.

Mr. Vincent expressed another liability. While his case of acceleration last year was, by all accounts, a positive and successful decision for the student, he still asserted,

There's that fear of the unknown. You always worry about did I do the right thing, was this the right decision. So there's always just that fear of the unknown and what will it look like when and if that student levels off. Or will that student

get to a place of regret where they wish they would have stayed with their peers.

So just that one challenge of just being unsure of the future.

On the other hand, Mrs. Cole, who has not had a recent referral for acceleration, thoughtfully considered,

The greatest challenge I think is the same challenge, so to speak, that we face any time we make a decision about a child's instructional placement be it acceleration, retention or not as much, but to some degree their eligibility for special education.

. . . But to some extent you're also trying to predict how they will continue to develop. . . So again, it's that decision that you are faced with when you're considering retention. Okay, I can predict what this may look like for this child next year or possibly even the year after that, but what will it look like in five years? What will it look like when this child is in high school and their peers can all drive and they can't? I think there's that kind of crystal ball activity we all go through in our desire to make the best short- and long-term decisions.

Regrettably, Mr. James echoed the sentiments of many of his colleagues,

Yes, I think that socially and emotionally you have to consider whether or not this is a socially and emotionally developmentally appropriate decision to make. The thing that you have to consider is if this happens at the foundational grade levels how will it impact them later in their academic career. Because at some point in time, sometimes children plateau and even out. Their background knowledge, their exposure sometimes helps them to have the ability to present themselves as a higher learner that is ready for the next level, but it doesn't always mean that it's the best thing for them just because that maturity might not be there. All facets of

their learning may not be there. And socially and emotionally their peers, it might not be the best for them.

Ms. Carter, who had years of experience in middle school as both a classroom teacher and assistant principal, provided a different perspective on the perceived and possible longitudinal impact on students who grade skip. She suggested,

Concerns. Again, we'll go back to the individual child. If the child is whole-grade accelerated, he's in there with much older, much wiser peers. Although he's very intelligent, emotionally he may be somewhat immature. So I'm worried about him emotionally getting picked on, targeted. He's younger, smaller, I'm worried about people saying stuff to him that'll impact his long-term emotional stability. So, mostly the physical safety of the child.

Mr. James contemplated the importance of clear policy and guidelines sharing,

Well, I think that if you don't have policies and procedures in place to justify the 'why' behind the decision-making, then you open yourself up to allow anyone to have the option. For me, I don't believe that that's the case. I believe you handle each child individually and you do what's best for that individual child. . . And I do believe that you have to have the social/emotional piece included on that checklist or that rubric that you use to justify your reasoning. But I don't think it's a can of worms. I think that's just fear. I think offering children the opportunity to go above and beyond or to excel past where they are is what we should do anyway.

On the other hand, Mrs. Carson was aware of a process, yet was still concerned,

I feel like because there is a process and because parents are involved and that we come to an agreement when making that decision that I would never put a child back after the child was accelerated. We would somehow provide support and make it work. And I would absolutely hope that the decision wasn't made frivolously and that we wouldn't accelerate a child who wasn't able to be successful.

Mrs. Hunter was very thoughtful about whether to consider whole-grade acceleration.

She commented on the effects of various stakeholders by sharing,

I think that one of the challenges is making sure that socially and emotionally the child's going to fit. There are lots of times where they might be ready academically—well I would assume plenty of times where they might be ready academically, but you worry about them being able to fit with the class and have friends and maintain friendships. I worry about the pressure that they feel either from their parents or the teacher. My teachers that had the accelerated students last year were great, but I could see where some teachers might put extra pressure on those students because they might think well they should be able to perform since they were able to skip a year. . . They might hold them to a higher expectation even though they're where they should be.

Mrs. Carson had a very interesting perspective about what she would do about a child who skipped a grade,

Psychologically I think that would be very detrimental [to put a child back after acceleration]. And then of course when a child is retained, that's another important consideration is psychologically how is that going to make the child

feel when they have worked hard all year long and somebody's telling them you're not ready to go. That's what I meant, I think it would send a message that I'm a failure, I can't do anything. That would be the last thing we would want any child to experience.

Finally, Ms. Adkins had an interesting perspective about her concern for the whole child.

She shared,

I think the pressures that students place on themselves. You've gotta be very aware of the risk factors. I think about my undergrad and where I got my graduate degree from and the suicide rate just as far as those pressures that we place on ourselves to be top notch and to do a great job. I would be curious about that. If I was studying the topic of grade acceleration, I would be curious about those long-term effects.

Theme: School logistics. This study-specific use of school logistics related to the complex operation of school including the allocation of human, fiscal, and material resources. In addition, school logistics referred to the ever-existing competing school needs and the responsibilities of principal leaders.

Transcripts revealed that 14 challenges to implementing whole-grade acceleration were related to school logistics. Reported most frequently were seven principals reporting a lack of processes and guidelines and four each noting a focus on low-performing students and the lock step notion that all students move grade to grade with age-peers. Less frequently reported, but important, was three principals who held the idea that the perception of elitism among families or the school community would exist if acceleration was used.

It is interesting to consider principals' responses about the challenges of whole-grade acceleration as related to the running of school. Whether they articulated that gifted students are not a priority or competing demands with diverse populations and the community as a whole, there were concerns about different stakeholder groups. To begin, Mr. James and Ms. Adkins shared about possible situations with parents. Mr. James revealed,

Everybody wants what's best for their own personal child. So when you think from a parent's perspective, if this child is accelerating and my child isn't, you have to be able to answer why on that. That is a challenge that you'll face—well that one can do it, but why can't mine. . . However, being able to say this is the “why” behind it because of this procedure or this policy or this set of criteria helps to support the reason why. But then looking at it, too, from the teacher's perspective, I'm sure that there are social things that come with moving a student and helping them transition and helping them be accepted and helping them have that understanding for the students the child's being sent to as well as the child herself. That transition should be supported.

Ms. Adkins shared her caution about the input of families by saying,

I think families think the world of their children, and it's not unusual to hear, perhaps, the phrase, “My child is gifted.” And so if a family feels that their student is capable, it's just like making teacher requests. The moment your community feels like you're open to accepting whoever that request is, you begin to get a lot of requests. . . Administrators feel like they're then going to get an influx or an overflow of requests for their children to be moved up a grade.

When asked if that has been her experience? “I have not.”

Mr. James discussed the issue of public relations and the acceptance of acceleration. In addition to the concerns of students emotionally and socially, he said,

I think that something I worry about—challenges are acceptance of why you do it. So the acceptance and understanding of why that’s an option and why it’s for some and not for others. I think that that’s a challenge you face.

In focusing on the possible gaps in instruction, Mr. Vincent said,

Depending on when it’s done in the year there’s the missing curriculum piece, just that transition for the student, transition from one class to another and what that public relations looks like for the other students, for siblings, for the receiving teacher, and for the teacher the student is leaving. Providing that closure, but also preparing the student for higher rigor, different expectations, different curriculum, different teaching style.

With regards to logistics within the school, Mr. Roberts was concerned with teacher acceptance,

I would say that number one, probably not an understanding of this process so much, or training provided or professional development provided to administration or teachers. So I think that getting them to buy in and believe and accept students [accelerants] would be a bit of a challenge.

Similarly, Mrs. Hunter thought a liability with acceleration was teacher centered. She wondered,

I worry about the pressure that they [accelerants] feel either from their parents or the teacher. My teachers that had the accelerated students last year were great,

but I could see where some teachers might put extra pressure on those students because they might think well they should be able to perform since they were able to skip a year. They might hold them to a higher expectation even though they're where they should be.

Finally, Ms. Adkins, Mr. Roberts, and Ms. Carter all expressed a concern about the logistics of scheduling and curriculum resources. Ms. Carter summed up this concern,

I don't have the curriculum at that school to meet his needs such as, for example, Algebra 2. I have a kid in middle school that needs Algebra 2. I don't have that class offered at that middle school, so I need to go outside the school to look for an online class, coursework, logistics to get into a high school. So in the elementary level, I think that's not an issue. At the middle school level, the whole-grade acceleration, opens a can of worms.

Summary

This chapter provided evidence to support the study's research questions related to the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs elementary principals have about whole-grade acceleration. Themes and subthemes emerged that revolved around unfamiliarity and inexperience with whole-grade acceleration, student welfare, and school logistics. A discussion of the landscape of 21st century public education also emerged.

Principals openly shared what they knew about whole-grade acceleration and their experiences, albeit limited. It was clear, however, that many of their responses were given within the context of their overarching concern for student welfare and consistent unfamiliarity with this academic option. Moreover, a focus on lower-achieving students

and knowledge about the lack of research support on retention may have influenced whole-grade acceleration being considered.

This chapter provided significant evidence that principals are committed to all students being successful; yet their unfamiliarity with grade skipping may actually affect this intervention from being considered for students. All principals said that whole-grade acceleration was an option, yet body language and certain words (“If”, “But”) seemed to contradict their full belief in this intervention. Similarly, a lack of knowledge about district policy and guidelines added to their caution.

The results of this study will be discussed in Chapter 5, along with conclusions and implications for future research and practice for decision-makers. The study revealed that principals are open to considering whole-grade acceleration, yet may struggle with the unknown long-term implications on students socially and emotionally. What constructs are needed to support principals as decision-makers are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Background

The purpose of this study was to investigate elementary principals' knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions of whole-grade acceleration as an educational option for gifted students. This chapter will provide a discussion of findings, including unexpected ones, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and conclusions. This exploratory qualitative case study was comprised of all nine elementary principals from one school district. It investigated the use of whole-grade acceleration in schools. Too often schools are environments where gifted learners are overlooked (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). To explore this phenomenon more fully, I conducted a cross-case analysis of nine elementary principals from a suburban school district in southeastern Virginia. Five research questions informed the development of the interview protocol. The researcher then conducted nine face-to-face, semi-structured interviews using the protocol. The researcher sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What background knowledge do elementary school principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
2. What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
3. What training in gifted education do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

4. What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?
5. What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the challenges/liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

Discussion

In this study, elementary principals provided significant insights into their knowledge of whole-grade acceleration and their perception of how it fits into how schools are run. For a majority of participants, they had little knowledge about acceleration and relied on their beliefs, biases, or concern for equality within the school setting. It was not clear if the participants were pro-actively against grade skipping or just not interested in investigating its use in their schools. Too often, principals provided answers to interview questions that sounded politically correct. Gifted students need principal leadership to assist in meeting their unique academic needs, just as it is for students with disabilities or limited language learners. However, this concern for the unique needs of gifted students simply did not appear in the study.

Despite the fact that principals expressed a commitment to meeting the needs of all students, this study showed they were more likely to focus on school logistics than the impact of acceleration on students. This is likely due to their unfamiliarity and limited experiences with the intervention. As a result, they were three times more likely to focus on challenges and liabilities than perceived benefits of acceleration. In fact, 51% of the time, principals were focused on school-related logistics over those of students. Results from this study provide the possibility that with professional development and exposure to whole-grade acceleration there can be capacity building among principals which can

progress the use of whole-grade acceleration forward within the landscape of 21st century public education. Continuing the conversation about acceleration will lessen the barriers that exist for gifted students to get the educational plan they need.

The results of this study are not completely unexpected. I was taken aback at the lack of knowledge that the participating principals possess. However, with knowledge comes the potential for principal leaders to become agents of change within their school culture. Principals would need to address and acknowledge the gaps in order to then fully engage in learning about this academic option. In *A Nation Empowered* (Assouline et al., 2015) the authors contended that great strides had been made in the 10 years since *A Nation Deceived* (Colangelo et al., 2004) began a national dialogue about acceleration. My experiences, including results from this study, indicate that this is not the case. Principals are not knowledgeable about acceleration and are, more troubling, even less inclined to advocate for its use. Moving forward with purpose will require a catalytic approach to what success looks like in our schools and, more important, in our principal leaders. Opportunities may be missed by rationalizing reasons not to use grade skipping when leaders could embrace benefits that are research-based.

Systemic reform in schools that will more fully address the academic needs of high-ability learners depends largely on leadership by principals. Stronge et al. (2008) outlined principal influence as vital to holding high expectations that “influence student achievement by shaping the school’s instructional climate and instructional organization” (p. 142). In a cross-case analysis on advocacy for gifted students, Robinson and Moon (2003) found that leadership is the most crucial component for student success. They

maintained that motivation, change agents, self-reflection, knowledge of gifted education, and leadership skill are all important if transformational leadership is to occur.

Gifted students who are provided a learning environment that supports their academic needs as well as social and emotional development increases the possibility they will make noteworthy contributions to society (Stanley, 2000). Similarly, Colangelo et al. (2004) maintained that high-ability learners require appropriate learning environments for their optimal growth. In addition, Lubinski et al. (2006) argued assessment of cognitive abilities early in their time in school prepares gifted students to maximize potential where complex information processing and creativity are required.

From the lens of human capital theory, principals play an important role in providing gifted students the interventions needed to build their skills and capacity. Whole-grade acceleration has been proven an effective strategy to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of high-ability students. Olssen et al. (2004) theorized that education and training increase individuals' cognitive capacity which, in turn, increases productivity which leads to increased income and, by extension, increased human capital. In a longitudinal study following high-ability learners over three decades, those with the greatest human capital not only maintained, but advanced the social and economic well-being of its citizens.

As presented in Chapter 4, elementary principals expressed hesitancy about using whole-grade acceleration regardless of the robust research that supports it as an appropriate, even needed, intervention for gifted students. Colangelo et al. (2004) argued, "When we tell ourselves that our brightest students would not benefit from acceleration, we deceive ourselves, our students, and the nation" (p. 1). While it is

admirable to be concerned for the welfare of gifted students, the preponderance of positive research studies on acceleration should be sufficient evidence that students do not suffer deleterious effects when grade skipped. Moreover, Cross et al. (2015) and Rogers (2002) concluded that accelerated students who are younger than their intellectual peers will not suffer from social or psychological problems. Studies have shown that gifted children tend to prefer socializing with older children and often get along better with them than with their age peers (Heinbokel, 2002; Kleinbok & Vidergor, 2009).

The findings from this study revealed that among all study participants there was both a dearth of knowledge and experiences with whole-grade acceleration. In *A Nation Empowered* (Assouline et al., 2015), the authors considered it only takes one disastrous experience with grade skipping to negatively influence decision-makers about acceleration (Assouline et al., 2015). Principals then rely on beliefs, biases, or preconceived ideas about acceleration.

There were two unexpected findings from this study. The first was the influence of the landscape of public education on principals and their consideration of whole-grade acceleration. The second was the role of graduate university schools of education play in principal preparation programs. Each finding will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

Major Findings

Research Question #1: What background knowledge do elementary school principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Lack of background knowledge. Principal responses to questions about their background knowledge of whole-grade acceleration were very consistent. Principals were both unfamiliar and limited in their experiences with acceleration. Daurio (1979) stated that educators expressed a “disproportionate amount of caution” and used “selective bias” in interpreting the research. This resistance may be due to “preconceived notions and irrational grounds rather than to an examination of the evidence” (Swiatek & Benbow, 1991, p. 528). However, Southern et al. (1989) found that educators who had personal or professional experiences with grade acceleration tended to be more accepting of acceleration than those without first-hand experience with this strategy. For this study, those principals with personal or professional experiences did not seem any more eager to use acceleration for gifted students.

While four of the nine participants had at least one referral for grade skipping in the last three years, none of the principals had studied whole-grade acceleration as an educational option for high-ability learners. It is not surprising that no principals had arranged for any professional development for his leadership team on the topic.

Two principals said they had university coursework in gifted education; however, one was a course in differentiation of curriculum and the other explained that it was an umbrella course with selected topics in special student populations. Seventy-eight percent of the principals had participated in professional development in gifted education provided by the study district and 67%, including a first-year principal, had arranged for

professional development for their staff. The practice of acceleration is not a frequently used option in the study district, despite the research of its effectiveness in practice (Hattie, 2009). As a result, principals may resort to their personal beliefs (Senge, 2010).

Retention versus acceleration. Each principal spoke at length concerning his knowledge about the unfavorable research on retention as an educational intervention. The study district has a joint policy on acceleration and retention. As a result, it is not difficult to understand why principals may appear to equate the negative research on retention with unknown research on acceleration. This is especially true as participants consistently shared that there was a lack of senior leadership in providing guidelines and processes. Therefore, principals appeared hesitant about using acceleration, especially when considering the social and emotional impacts on students. Each participant mentioned he knows the research does not generally support the use of retention, but was relatively silent on whether the body of literature supports acceleration as a strategy for gifted students.

Research Question #2: What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Personal and professional experiences influenced attitudes toward acceleration. Research question 2 investigated elementary principals' personal and professional experiences with whole-grade acceleration. Only one principal, Mr. Vincent, had a personal experience with being considered for grade skipping. Ultimately, his mother declined this option in order to keep him with his same-age cousin. Interestingly, Mr. Allen was retained in elementary school and believed it to have been

the right choice for him socially and emotionally. Ms. Carter laughed when asked about personal experiences with acceleration saying her children were all “normal.”

The participants are principals, but also human beings, with a collection of lived experiences. If the participant has had little interaction with this intervention, he may only be able to make internalized inferences. Moreover, if principals have had a negative experience with grade skipping, this may affect their attitudes and beliefs. In fact, Plucker (Assouline et al., 2015) argued that it only takes one disastrous encounter with acceleration to influence decision-makers’ use of the option.

Vialle et al. (2001) summed up their research findings by noting that while studies continue to support the positive effects of acceleration on students, ongoing resistance exists in practice. In addition, the authors wrote that the main attitude of administrators is “early ripe, early rot,” thereby indefatigably resisting grade skipping. Results from this study are consistent with principals’ concern for student welfare.

The transcripts revealed an overarching concern and fear for student welfare when it comes to acceleration, even worrying that students may “even out” over time. In other words, principals are concerned that some students may appear to be more advanced when, potentially, their cognitive abilities will level out. In that case, an accelerant could be considered no more advanced than a non-accelerated student. After all, with retention, principals know what is involved: a repeat of the same academic grade. A lack of experience or research background on acceleration may encourage principals to be cautious when considering this educational intervention.

Over the last three years four principals in the study district received five requests for whole-grade acceleration. Fifty-six percent of participants knew there was a policy,

but none had proactively arranged for professional development for his leadership team. The major concerns were a lack of leadership provided by central office staff and a lack of planning for the use of acceleration, thereby causing them to rely on perceptions, beliefs, or biases.

Research Question #3: What training in gifted education do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?

Absence of training in whole-grade acceleration. Research question 3 was intended to explore principals' training in gifted education regarding whole-grade acceleration. Professional development on acceleration might encourage principals to change not only their beliefs, but also school-wide practice (Vialle et al., 2001). Regrettably, a major finding was that while principals had participated in some limited gifted training they received no training or professional development on acceleration. One study examined principals in Florida and their perspectives on acceleration (Guilbault, 2009). The author found that administrators' reluctance was due to worry about the social and emotional development of students. Interestingly, Guilbault (2009) found no correlation between administrators' background knowledge of gifted education and the use of acceleration. This was not the case in this study.

No principal had received any professional development from the school district on whole-grade acceleration. However, Vialle et al. (2001) suggested that training in gifted education may increase the consideration and use of whole-grade acceleration. Professional development for principal leaders could powerfully lower or remove a barrier to acceleration being considered.

This correlates with them not believing that senior leadership and/or central office personnel had provided adequate guidance, processes, or procedures. Principals relied on their beliefs more than knowledge about this option.

From multiple reviews of the transcripts, no principal indicated any university coursework that included the study of whole-grade acceleration. I expected for those who had an umbrella course in special student populations would have studied accelerative options as topic of study. A significant finding relative to research question 3 is that no principal studied during his university coursework. So, it is not surprising that no principal had arranged for staff development on acceleration for their leadership team or faculty. Principals do not have this academic strategy in their toolkit. Three principals said they had coursework in gifted education, but upon further review of the transcripts, one course was on differentiation of curriculum, another was an umbrella class of special populations, and Mr. Allen equated what he described as more of a problem-based learning perspective with gifted coursework. There was no indication that any participant had studied the academic, social, or emotional needs of gifted learners. The role of university schools of education will be discussed later in this chapter.

Research Question #4: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?

Perceived limited benefits of whole-grade acceleration. It was no surprise that when asked about possible benefits they perceive or consider about students who skip a grade that no one mentioned a benefit to be social or emotional. Five principals listed a benefit as an opportunity for gifted students and three considered a benefit to be academic. Researchers have consistently reported positive effects on students as a result

of academic acceleration (Assouline et al., 2015; Colangelo et al., 2004; Gross & van Vliet, 2005; Kulik, 2004; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1992; Vialle et al., 2001).

Students who skip a grade have been found to outperform older peers academically while showing comparable social and emotional development (Colangelo et al., 2004; Kulik, 2004; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1984, 1992; Sayler & Brookshire, 1993; Southern & Jones, 1991). Empirical studies on acceleration have demonstrated the benefits to students, and without evidence of psychosocial difficulties (Kent, 1992; Kulik, 2004; J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1984, 1989, 1992; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011).

Mrs. Cole provided a unique insight into a possible benefit of a student skipping a grade by inquiring whether a happier student would make for a happier household. However, it was not said within the context of whole-grade acceleration being an appropriate option. She did not connect the intervention leading to the healthy social and emotional development of a student placed with intellectual, not age peers.

A benefit that was not mentioned by any principal was the idea that students who skip a grade may increase their human capital in several ways. Ms. Carter was the only one who said that whole-grade acceleration gets students to college sooner. Park et al. (2013) used data from a 40-year longitudinal study of 3,467 accelerants and their educational and professional outcomes. They reported that whole-grade acceleration directly affected the likelihood that students would pursue advanced degrees and would finish their training earlier than age peers. They argued, “an earlier career start from acceleration will allow an individual to devote more time in early adulthood to creative production, and this will result in an increased level of accomplishment over the course

of one's career" (p. 177). Human capital can be increased and invested when administrators are willing to consider whole-grade acceleration.

Research Question #5: What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

Challenges in implementing whole-grade acceleration. As unsurprising as it was for principals to be able to create a minimal list of benefits, it was expected that the primary challenges of grade skipping were fear of the unknown and social and emotional outcomes. However, there is overwhelming research related to its benefits. There is no evidence that grade acceleration has a negative influence on a student's social and emotional development (J. A. Kulik & C. L. C. Kulik, 1992; Saylor & Brookshire, 1993; Southern & Jones, 1991). Most recently, Cross et al. (2015) noted an ever-increasing body of research that demonstrates there is a small to medium positive psychological effect on students who skip a grade. From students' perspective, they report positive benefits to acceleration. Heinbokel (2002) described how students who had grade skipped claimed they had no difficulty in catching up with material; instead, they articulated how pleased they were to go at their pace.

So, while findings were limited concerning possible benefits of acceleration, principals easily listed challenges related to student welfare, issues of leadership, and school logistics, even if that principal has had no personal or professional experience or knowledge. Three principals were concerned with the "evening out" possibility. Each of the four participants who have had professional experiences of students who accelerated successfully, they continued to express hesitancy and fear for students and their futures.

Finally, two principals expressed a concern that if one student skipped a grade it might appear elitist to other members of the school community.

Table 8

Benefits vs. Challenges Comparison

Attribution	# Responses	# Frequencies
Benefit of Acceleration	9	20
Challenge of Acceleration	25	71

Table 8 provides a comparison of listed benefits versus challenges. In this study, principals collectively came up with nine unique benefits a total of 20 times and 25 unique challenges a total of 71 times. The number of challenges was reported more than three times of the number of benefits. In fact, they came up with fewer benefits and reported less frequently than challenges. And, not only were the number of challenges three times more common, but the frequency with which they were reported was more than threefold. The number of challenges was bigger but also in the number of times mentioned reflects a significant difference between challenges and benefits. It is likely principals recognize few benefits to acceleration so they were reported rarely. The lengthy challenges identified a total of 71 times may mean challenges were recognized with some consistency and with great frequency.

Table 9 provides data on the number of principal responses about challenges to acceleration by the two themes of student welfare and school logistics. Of the 25 challenges to using acceleration, 11 were related to student welfare and 36 to school logistics. In other words, 51% of the time principals expressed a challenge or liability to be one directly related to the leading or running of school; whereas 49% of their concerns

were for student welfare. See Table 7 for a frequency distribution of challenges reported by participants.

Table 9

Summary Chart for Challenges to Acceleration

Theme	# Responses	Total # Principal Occurrences	%
Student Welfare	11	35	49%
School Logistics	36	71	51%

Southern et al. (1989) found that school personnel were mainly concerned with the potential social and emotional damage if students skip a grade even in light of the research that consistently demonstrates student outcomes are positive not only academically, but socially and emotionally. Concomitantly, Colangelo et al. (2004) reported that school staff, while committed to children, often believe “safe is better than sorry” because harm may result if children are pushed, or gaps in their knowledge base may occur if they skip a grade. However, participants in this study were more likely to be focused on other challenges to acceleration than those directly related to the student. In fact, 51% of the time principals were focused on challenges related to school logistics.

Additional Findings

Influence of Public Education on Leadership Decision-making

The influence of the institution of school on perceptions regarding student acceleration was an unexpected finding of the study. In Chapter 1, I imagined a setting where students had equitable access to the appropriate educational interventions needed for them to be successful. However, the requirements of NCLB (2001), now ESSA

(2015), changed that landscape. While ESSA provides more flexibility, as with NCLB, there is continued emphasis on closing the achievement gap (Korte, 2015).

VanTassel-Baska (1986, 1991) maintained that research in support of acceleration is often ignored due to schools' conservative approach to education. She argued that acceleration may challenge the democratic notion that only some students may be able to "get ahead" while others have educational gaps. Others would argue that the pressure to meet minimum competencies impacts the education of gifted students. Hargrove (2012) observed that the demands for low-performing students to meet minimum standards has led to a lack of incentives for schools to focus on the advanced learning needs of some, thereby perpetuating a degree of mediocrity.

Colangelo et al. (2004) maintained that schools "keep bright students in line by forcing them to learn in a lock-step manner with their classmates. Teachers and principals disregard students' desires to learn more, much more, than they are being taught" (p. 1). Cross (2002) has posited that changing the term from acceleration to "opportunity to learn" or "appropriate pacing" might sway school personnel to reconsider this educational intervention as an appropriate form of rigor and challenge for gifted students. This would run counter to the lock-step notion of public education and provide more individualized instruction for high-ability learners. It will take strong instructional leadership by principals to affect true and lasting change.

Due to the responsibilities of principals, schools are not always a place where each and every student, especially every gifted student, gets the exact intervention needed (Lewis et al., 2007). Every principal in this study commented that the emphasis is on supporting low-achieving or under-performing student populations at the expense of

high-ability learners. A. W. Hoy and W. K. Hoy (2003), in fact, suggested there is “a growing recognition that gifted students are being poorly served by most public schools” (p. 39).

Lewis et al. (2007) reported that high-ability learners are underserved in our schools. They noted, “In these standard-driven times, it is a strong and forward-looking principal who recognizes that all students need to learn something new each day” (p. 57). While grade acceleration can be an effective intervention for gifted students, positive support must exist from the school during the decision-making process (Lohman & Marron, 2008). Finally, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) argued that schools need principals who are focused on student achievement in order to be successful. In addition to meeting all of the challenges of running schools, principals are most effective when their efforts promote student learning (Fullan, 2003; W. K. Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

I did not anticipate principals’ viewpoints would focus so strongly on the influence of public education and its logistics on meeting the needs of gifted students. Unfortunately, study findings indicated, at least in this study district, the impact of the institution in the following ways:

1. *Whole-grade acceleration is not a popular educational intervention.*
2. *Principals indicated their focus was on low-achieving students.*
3. *There is a sense of “lock step” that everyone must complete the same educational plan – moving from one grade to the next in the same fashion.*
4. *The influence of the knowledge of retention in schools has a negative influence on the use of acceleration.*

5. *An emphasis on reacting to the immediate crises that arise as instructional leaders and building managers.*

The Role of University Schools of Education

A second unintended finding is the role university schools of education play in principal preparation programs today. As first discussed in Table 2, only two principals mentioned any gifted coursework while at university. However, upon further probing, no one had a course in gifted education specifically; rather, they had received some gifted education study as part of an umbrella course in special student populations. While no question specifically inquired about their principal preparation programs, no one mentioned any training related specifically to whole-grade acceleration. In other words, nine out of nine principals had received no specific training in whole-grade acceleration which may suggest that programs of study do not address this topic in schools of education. I did not specifically inquire about this possibility because it was not considered a priori this study.

It would be helpful if research exposure on acceleration began in graduate schools of education. Neihart (2007) suggested that educational leaders should employ research about acceleration when evaluating school and district practices and then institute policies that reflect best practice. Study participants had very little exposure to gifted education during their coursework and no specific experience with whole-grade acceleration. Today's schools of education often require a course on special student populations. However, the study of gifted students' academic, social, and emotional needs may be included as only a part of an umbrella course. Partnership for Learning, which builds awareness, understanding, and support for improving public education

published an article that highlighted the importance of schools of education that serve as the primary provider of principals today; yet, they point to emerging evidence for the need of more non-traditional pathways to administrative positions. The article also included remarks from former Education Secretary Arne Duncan in a speech at Columbia University's Teacher College,

By almost any standard, many if not most of the nation's 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st century classroom. America's university-based teacher preparation programs need revolutionary change—not evolutionary tinkering (Partnership for Learning, 2010, p. 4).

The authors of *A Nation Empowered* posited that great progress has been made in the American landscape of acceptance of acceleration as an academic option for gifted students. However, they strongly point out that university schools of education and their lack of teacher preparation about gifted students remains a “major disappointment” (Assouline et al., 2015, p. 43). They highlighted numerous reasons for the current status, including “inertia” which reflects limited funding and “less interest” in this special population of students. In addition, Dr. Colangelo emphasized,

It is the responsibility of Colleges of Education to prepare future teachers with the most accurate, evidence-based practices to enhance the individual learning needs of students. Acceleration is documented to be the single most effective intervention for high-ability students. Most education faculty do not cover

acceleration in courses or presentations about gifted students. This is inexcusable.

(Assouline et al., 2015, p. 43)

Findings from this study may indicate the role that schools of education may have fostered unintended effects on principal preparation programs.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this case study was to explore the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs that elementary principals have about whole-grade acceleration and how they influence decision-making. Through a human capital framework, the researcher was interested in determining the extent to which investment is made for gifted students. Schools can be a place that afford opportunities for students' human capital to be increased, thereby setting the stage for them to be successful in their future, as quantified by increased income, professional opportunities, and quality of life (Baptiste, 2001). In addition, Stanley (2000) argued that gifted students who are provided a learning environment which supports the academic, social, and emotional needs increases the possibility that they will make noteworthy contributions to society. In other words, high ability learners require appropriate learning environments for their optimal growth (Colangelo et al., 2004). Human capital can be increased or decreased by schools.

An in-depth review of one district's nine principals' knowledge and experiences with whole-grade acceleration provided a clear picture of their dedication to student welfare coupled with an overwhelming unfamiliarity with acceleration as an academic option. Both interest in student welfare and lack of knowledge about acceleration most influenced participants' answers to interview questions. However, elementary principals are responsible for helping to provide appropriate gifted programming (Lewis et al.,

2007; Weber, Colarulli-Daniels, & Leinhauser, 2003). In addition, DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) argued that it is important for administrators to be change agents who create a positive learning environment for gifted students. It is clear that some participants for this study want to grow in their understanding of whole-grade acceleration. They are eager for consistent guidelines, practices, and resources so they can support the needs of gifted students.

In summary, findings of this study included:

1. *Principals' knowledge of retention influences their perceptions (in absence of knowledge) of whole-grade acceleration.*
2. *Principals are unfamiliar with whole-grade acceleration and have conducted no research.*
3. *School logistics influence principals' decision-making about acceleration.*
4. *Principals in the study district had little to no coursework in gifted education and none in acceleration.*
5. *High-stakes testing in public education impacts principals' decision-making where the focus is often on low-performing students.*
6. *Principals have limited professional experiences and virtually no personal experiences with acceleration.*
7. *Principals' responses and body language project an unease with using acceleration even when they say they are open to it.*
8. *No principal has shared any research or accepted practices about acceleration for his administrative team.*

9. *A policy exists in the study district, but senior leadership has not provided the clarifying support, resources, or professional development on whole-grade acceleration.*
10. *Principals did not express overt concern about academic outcomes of accelerants.*
11. *Principals were consistently concerned about the social and emotional outcomes of accelerated students.*
12. *Principals expressed a concern about the future outcomes of students.*
13. *Principals were concerned due to commitment to student welfare.*
14. *Principals were three times more likely to list possible challenges of acceleration to benefits.*
15. *Principals were concerned about negative perceptions of elitism if acceleration was considered for one student and not another.*
16. *Principals hold to the notion that all students need to progress through school in a lock-step fashion where every student proceeds in the same way, from one grade to the next.*
17. *Years of teaching do not seem to impact the consideration of acceleration.*
18. *Years of administrative experience do not seem to impact the consideration of acceleration.*
19. *Awareness of a policy on acceleration does not seem to impact the consideration of acceleration.*
20. *No principal has an endorsement in gifted education.*

Implications for Practice and Policy

Background

The findings from this study provided insights into potential impacts on practice and the development of policies on whole-grade acceleration for K-12 public school districts. The demands, first of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) and, more recently, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; as cited in Civic Impulse, 2016), have placed the dominant focus on low- or underperforming students since *A Nation Deceived* was published (Colangelo et al., 2004). Dr. Colangelo reflected on that time,

It was in an atmosphere of conflict, misunderstanding, and apprehension about acceleration. Our goal, in developing the report, was to start a new conversation in America's schools regarding the acceleration of gifted students—a conversation based on evidence and research, rather than on personal bias, selective recall, and stereotypical thinking. (as cited in Assouline et al., 2015, p. 7)

Today, Dr. Colangelo believes that since 2004 that goal has exceeded expectations. However, as discussed in the previous section, the influence of public education impacted the study's participants. There has been no conversation or goal setting with regard to building capacity with using acceleration. More needs to be done to persuade decision makers in our public schools of the importance of developing practices for using acceleration, as well as substantive policies.

Importance of Principal Leadership

Principals who are instructional leaders in their schools support student achievement and student learning. Student achievement is ensured when principals are

engaged in the teaching and learning process (Fullan, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; Murphy et al., 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Many studies have reported a strong correlation between principal leadership and student achievement and instructional effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). More specifically, Stronge et al. (2008) argued the principal's role is an important catalyst for "high quality instructional progress and, ultimately, enhancing student achievement" (p. 139).

VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2006) argued that the principal must advocate for gifted students by promoting appropriate interventions, including acceleration. Zimmerman (2011) reported out some leaders who have had negative experiences might be "overly cautious and appearing indecisive or resistant to taking action when necessary" (p. 109). Conversely, Neihart (2007) suggested that leaders can be most successful when employing research when evaluating school and district practices and then introducing research best practice policies.

So while previous studies regarding student outcomes of acceleration have been markedly favorable, leader perceptions may be decidedly negative (Rogers & Kimpston, 1992). Kulik and Kulik (1984) also found that acceleration may not be a popular intervention because it could be seen as "undemocratic, promoting snobbery in an accelerated elite and a sense of inferiority in those who are left behind" (p. 84). More recently, Southern and Jones (2015) reported that resistance by administrators and teachers may discourage acceleration by "employing alarmist rhetoric about consequences or even denying that it is possible or legal to accelerate students" (p. 14). It

is, therefore, crucial that principal leaders embrace the importance of their position by championing the needs of all students, including gifted students.

Knowledge Development and Dissemination

The interview experience and the participants' views revealed a true dedication to student welfare. They strive to meet the needs of every child and provide the appropriate educational interventions. However, principals also need to have a working knowledge of acceleration in order to make appropriate and informed decisions. Exposure to the research on acceleration, as well as research best practice guidelines from senior leadership will begin a powerful conversation among stakeholders. What is also needed is a school district needs assessment study, professional development on acceleration, and tools to support whole-grade acceleration being a viable educational option.

The participants provided carefully considered comments related to their background knowledge about acceleration, however limited, and their perceptions and beliefs about this academic option. In *A Nation Empowered*, the authors emphasized, "The research is robust and unanimous in support of acceleration. You have to really search to find any qualified negatives" (Assouline et al., 2015, p. 14). Dr. Colangelo continued,

And therein lies the paradox. When you don't believe in something, you demand nearly perfect evidence. If you are comfortable with an educational intervention, anecdotal evidence is plentiful and sufficient. When it comes to acceleration as an intervention, we do have consistently robust research evidence. However, that is not enough to put acceleration into common practice. (as cited in Assouline et al., 2015, p. 14)

Principals relied on their beliefs in the near absence of experience or familiarity with acceleration.

Negative Perceptions of Elitism

It is not unusual for gifted education to be perceived as elitist. As a result, many school personnel are disinterested with gifted education because it may be perceived as not only elitist, but “unfair and a misuse of resources. Identifying some students as gifted, they believe, somehow makes other students feel bad” (Assouline et al., 2015, p. 39). Conversely, principals who are advocates for gifted learners may also need to be advocates for their academic needs.

The influence of retention as an intervention for low-performing students may impact principals’ perceptions both of gifted students and acceleration. Where retention implies failure, gifted education may represent privilege to many school community members. The implication is that principals need to consider all of their student populations and not be reluctant to meet the educational needs of high-ability learners as equitably as below grade level students. *In A Nation Empowered*, Dr. Jonathan Wai noted, “Americans care more about equity than they do about excellence. I think that’s the natural climate today. If we can’t persuade people based on that climate, then there’s little we can do” (Assouline et al., 2015, p. 40). While few would argue there are but a limited number of world-class athletes or musicians, the notion of superior cognitive abilities sometimes is not a comfortable notion in our public schools.

Acceleration Tools and Guidance

Findings from this study point to the need, in lieu of principal knowledge about acceleration, guidance from senior leadership that includes processes, guidelines, policy, and effective tools to use to determine the readiness of a student to be grade skipped.

Feldhusen et al. (2002) maintained that acceleration decisions need to use guidelines that can be measured objectively to remove bias in decision-making. School districts might be best served using *The Iowa Acceleration Scale*. Unfortunately, Dr. Susan Assouline and colleagues (2015) reminded us, “too many educators still lack familiarity with the idea of acceleration, though it is better than it was” (p. 13). In *A Nation Empowered*, the authors presented evidence of a change in the conversation about acceleration and its associated practice and Dr. Assouline reflected on the improved knowledge base from ten years earlier (Assouline et al., 2015).

The Iowa Acceleration Scale (3rd ed.), is a research-based tool with over 20 years of field and clinical testing that provides an objective planning tool to determine the appropriateness of whole-grade acceleration for a student. The tool is used to obtain a holistic view of a student academically, socially, and emotionally. The importance of using *The Iowa Acceleration Scale* is to remove inherent bias of educators who largely lack knowledge about whole-grade acceleration. Teams of educators, along with the student’s family, work collaboratively to make informed decisions, thus eliminating the fear principals may have of making a decision in isolation.

Policy Implications Regarding Student Accelerative Options

Acceleration is an educational intervention that matches students’ intellectual ability with appropriate grade placement. A robust school board policy that is not in

connection with a policy on retention is vital to provide a viable construct for decision-makers to take appropriate steps that proactively support the academic needs of gifted students. The practical limitation is school boards may lack the capacity to know what constitutes a robust policy on accelerative options. In order to buttress policy development, the authors of *A Nation Empowered* encouraged school districts to investigate model acceleration policies by visiting the Acceleration Institute (Assouline et al., 2015). The authors contended that lack of policy that allows for acceleration combined with often negative attitudes of school personnel stand as ongoing roadblocks to its use in schools.

Cross et al. (2015) argued for the importance of decision-makers to understand that “withholding of acceleration opportunities. . . can have a bigger and longer lasting negative effect on adjustment than the provision of acceleration opportunities” (p. 39). VanTassel-Baska (2015) underscored the importance of policy development in gifted education because, “research on the effectiveness of acceleration is the bedrock for best practice in gifted education” (p. 43). Importantly, in *Guidelines for developing an academic acceleration policy* (IRPA, NAGC, & CSDPG, 2009) noted that the absence of a policy outlining the use of acceleration, inconsistent practices may be developed that, in actuality, negatively impact acceleration to be considered for gifted students.

Summary of Implications for Practice and Policy

1. *There is a need for a robust policy on acceleration.*
2. *There is a need for sustainable leadership from central office personnel as well as principal leaders.*

3. *There is a need for a plan from senior leadership to principals that includes specific research best practice guidelines, processes, and tools.*
4. *There is a need for a plan from senior leadership to principals that includes professional development about the research on acceleration and the tools available to support decision-making.*
5. *There is a need for specialized training for stakeholder groups.*
6. *There is a need for open mindedness and heightened awareness of positive effects of acceleration.*
7. *There is a need for advertising “success stories” and positive public relations.*
8. *There is a need for district senior leadership to provide direction and strategic vision in using this educational option for gifted students.*

Recommendations for Further Study

The study of elementary principals’ knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration provided interesting findings and results for consideration of future studies. Researchers think about a topic in ever-expanding ways (Clandin & Connelly, 2004).

Future research might investigate and compare the practices of school personnel from school districts with robust policy and practices to other districts whose policy and practices either do not yet exist, or are incompletely developed. In this way, the impact of personal knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs could be more closely measured as a predictor of acceleration being a viable academic option. A case study methodology could be designed that would involve participants from different school districts to expand the cross-case analysis of principals.

As a result of this study's findings, additional recommendations for further study could include:

1. A study of university schools of education to determine the extent to which administrator preparation programs include coursework on gifted education, including studying accelerative options for high-ability learners.
2. A study of school districts' practices and policy on acceleration from a geographic standpoint (i.e., East Coast districts vs. Midwest, etc.).
3. A study of varied educators' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration. Participants might include teachers, counselors, superintendents, etc.
4. A study of the role of the principal as an advocate for gifted students, including appropriate academic options.
5. Only one state requires moderate training in gifted education as part of teacher preparation; and two states require actual coursework (NAGC, 2015). A study of the impact those state mandates have on school districts compared to states without any gifted education requirement.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study, with cross-case analysis, investigated one district's nine elementary principals' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about whole-grade acceleration as an education option for gifted students. Multiple reviews of the transcripts provided a wide range of findings. There is little research on the impact principals have as decision-makers on whether grade skipping is considered. On the one hand, principals communicated dedication to meeting the needs of all students, yet

hesitated on whether whole-grade acceleration was an appropriate option for high-ability learners.

Previous literature in the field of gifted education related to acceleration has focused almost exclusively on the student outcomes of accelerants—academically, socially, and emotionally. There is consistent and abundant research on the positive effects on students. However, there is little in the literature about the influence of decision-makers (especially principals) on whether grade skipping is an educational option in our schools.

The findings of this study are significant and add to the research base in several ways. They underscore an ongoing, limited understanding of acceleration by principals. Participants likely attributed their greater understanding of retention to acceleration, thereby making an unintended negative correlation to whole-grade acceleration. Moreover, this study found that in addition to knowing very little about acceleration, the participants had little personal or professional experiences.

Two unexpected findings were the influence of public education and the role of university schools of education and their principal preparation programs. In addition, ever-increasing and changing requirements have on these influences affect priorities and competing school demands.

This study developed out of a profound and personal interest in whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students. What resonated with me as a practitioner was there was a gap in the literature about the influence of decision-makers about acceleration, more specifically principals as gatekeepers. I knew from experience that school personnel tend to be reluctant (or cautious) about considering

grade skipping regardless of the body of research that supports the positive outcomes on students, academically, socially, and emotionally. Results from this study demonstrate a need for additional studies related to the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs of principals regarding whole-grade acceleration for gifted students.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol – Whole-Grade Acceleration

Date of Interview: **Time of Interview:** **Interview Location:**
Interviewee: **Position of Interviewer:** Elementary school principal
Interviewer: Allison A. Sheppard

Project Description: The purpose of this study is to investigate the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs of elementary principals regarding whole-grade acceleration for gifted students. This case study model will consist of the study of one school district's nine elementary principals that will provide data for the researcher to use in order to analyze what ways background knowledge, professional experiences, and training in gifted education influence the use of this educational intervention. In addition, data will be collected to analyze in what ways personal philosophies about education of gifted students is positively or negatively influenced by district-wide policies and practices.

Pre-Interview Questions:

1. What degree(s) and/or certification(s) have you earned?
2. Have you completed any gifted education coursework? If so, please describe.
3. Have you completed any gifted training? If so, please describe.
4. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
5. What subject(s) and/or grade(s) did you teach?
6. How many years did you spend as an assistant principal?
7. How many years have you been a principal? Where have you been a principal?
8. Since you have been a principal, have you arranged for any professional development for your staff related to gifted education? If yes, please describe topic(s).
9. Please describe the specific demographics of your school.

Interview Questions:

I would like to ask about the practice of acceleration in your district:

10. Please describe what you know about your district's policy and/or guidelines related to whole-grade acceleration.
11. Are there any logistics that make considering whole-grade acceleration complicated?
12. I have heard that if whole-grade acceleration is an option it opens a "can of worms" for principals. What do you think this metaphor means?

13. Please describe any conversations you have had with other principals or senior leadership about whole-grade acceleration.
 14. Please describe any occurrences you have had with teachers related to whole-grade acceleration for a student.
 15. Please describe any occasions where parents have requested whole-grade acceleration for their child.
 16. When you receive a request for whole-grade acceleration for a student, what steps do you take? Or, how do you decide what steps to take?
 - a. Is it an option at your school?
 - b. What data are collected, if any?
 - c. Who is involved, if anyone, other than you?
 - d. How many students have whole-grade accelerated in the last three years? In what grades?
 17. If you have been involved with students being whole-grade accelerated, with what student outcomes are you aware?
 - a. Academic
 - b. Social
 - c. Emotional
 18. Describe the types of professional development opportunities, if any, your district provides regarding gifted education or whole-grade acceleration.
 19. In the past three years, have you or your administrative team researched, studied, or implemented whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students?
- I would like to ask about your experiences with whole-grade acceleration.**
20. Please describe your personal philosophy on the education of gifted students.
 21. When you think of whole-grade acceleration, what stands out in your mind?
 22. Tell me what you know about whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students? (probe: research, myths, concerns, etc.)
 23. How do you personally feel about the use of whole-grade acceleration?

24. Describe any personal experiences you have had related to whole-grade acceleration?
25. What challenges/liabilities do you associate with the use of whole-grade acceleration?
26. What benefits do you associate with the use of whole-grade acceleration?
27. Do you consider whole-grade acceleration as an option for gifted students? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Table of Specifications

Knowledge, Perceptions, and Beliefs of Elementary Principals Regarding Whole-Grade Acceleration for Gifted Students

Research Questions:

1. What background knowledge do elementary school principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
2. What personal or professional experiences do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
3. What training in gifted education do elementary principals have regarding whole-grade acceleration?
4. What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the benefits of whole-grade acceleration?
5. What do elementary principals perceive (consider) to be the liabilities of whole-grade acceleration?

Table of Specifications

Interview Question	Research Question
1. What degree(s) and/or certification(s) have you earned?	R3
2. Have you completed any gifted education coursework? If so, please describe.	R3
3. Have you completed any gifted training? If so, please describe	R3
4. How many years of teaching experience do you have?	
5. What subject(s) and/or grade(s) did you teach?	R3
6. How many years did you spend as an assistant principal?	R2
7. How many years have you been a principal? Where have you been a principal?	R2
8. Since you have been a principal, have you arranged for any professional development for your staff related to gifted education? If yes, please describe topic(s).	R2, R3
9. Please describe the specific demographics of your school.	
10. Please describe what you know about your district's policy and/or guidelines related to whole-grade acceleration.	R2
11. Are there any logistics that make considering whole-grade acceleration complicated?	R1, R2
12. I have heard that if whole-grade acceleration is an option it opens a "can of worms" for principals. What do you think this metaphor means?	R1, R2, R4, R5
13. Please describe any conversations you have had with other principals or senior leadership about whole-grade acceleration.	R2
14. Please describe any occurrences you have had with teachers related to whole-grade acceleration for a student.	R2

Interview Question	Research Question
15. Please describe any occasions where parents have requested whole-grade acceleration for their child.	R2
16. When you receive a request for whole-grade acceleration for a student, what steps do you take? Or, how do you decide what steps to take? a. Is it an option at your school? b. What data are collected, if any? c. Who is involved, if anyone, other than you? d. How many students have whole-grade accelerated in the last three years? In what grades?	R1, R2, R3
17. If you have been involved with students being whole-grade accelerated, with what student outcomes are you aware? a. Academic b. Social c. Emotional	R2
18. Describe the types of professional development opportunities, if any, your district provides regarding gifted education or whole-grade acceleration.	R2, R3
19. In the past three years, have you or your administrative team researched, studied, or implemented whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students?	R2, R3
20. Please describe your personal philosophy on the education of gifted students.	R1, R3
21. When you think of whole-grade acceleration, what stands out in your mind?	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5
22. Tell me what you know about whole-grade acceleration as an educational intervention for gifted students? (probe: research, myths, concerns, etc.)	R1, R2, R3
23. How do you personally feel about the use of whole-grade acceleration?	R1, R2
24. Describe any personal experiences you have had related to whole-grade acceleration?	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5
25. What challenges/liabilities do you associate with the use of whole-grade acceleration?	R1, R2, R3, R5
26. What benefits do you associate with the use of whole-grade acceleration?	R1, R2, R3, R4
27. Do you consider whole-grade acceleration as an option for gifted students? Why or why not?	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Research Participation Informed Consent Form School of Education, The College of William and Mary

Spring 2017 **Protocol #:** EDIRC-2017-01-03-11696

Title: “Knowledge, Perceptions, and Beliefs of Elementary Principals Regarding Whole-Grade Acceleration for Gifted Students”

Principal Investigators: Allison A. Sheppard and Dr. Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D.

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this study is to investigate the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs of elementary principals related to the use of whole-grade acceleration with high-ability learners. In addition, their prior training in gifted education, background experiences, and demographic variables will be examined. The researcher will also explore in what ways, if any, personal philosophies about education in general, and acceleration more specifically, are positively or negatively influenced by district-wide policies and practices.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview that includes pre-interview questions related to your educational and professional background. The interviews will be audio-recorded and you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure clarity or provide feedback. This interview should last approximately 60 minutes at a time and location of convenience to you.

Discomforts and Risks: There are no known risks associated with this study. You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

Benefits: There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, we hope that the information obtained from this study will provide implications for practice and future research.

Confidentiality: Your participation is confidential. The information you contribute to this research will be identifiable only by a pseudonym assigned to you. After the interview, there will be no way to connect your responses with your personal identity.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may choose to skip any interview question. Participants will not be compensated for their participation.

Questions or concerns regarding participation in this research should be directed to: Dr. Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D., 757.221.2210

I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this study to Dr. Tom Ward, Chair of the Education Institutional Review Committee by telephone ([757-221-2358](tel:757-221-2358)) or email (tjward@wm.edu).

I agree to participate in this study and have read all the information provided on this form. My signature below confirms that my participation in this project is voluntary, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____ date _____
(signature)

_____ date _____
(witness)

THIS PROJECT WAS APPROVED BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757.221.3966) ON 2017-02-01 AND EXPIRES ON 2018-02-01.

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