

SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF GIFTED ACHIEVERS AND UNDERACHIEVERS:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Anne Hadley Behrend

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

Although much research exists on the academic benefits of ability grouping for highly gifted students, and considerable numbers of studies are reported in the literature concerning the emotional and social adjustment of these talented students, there is a lack of information on the reasons for the distinct disparity in the levels of achievement attained by members of this group. This study investigated, from the perceptions of the students themselves, what school factors make the difference in their motivation to succeed. The researcher examined the academic and later careers of seven gifted young people, and interviewed three of their teachers as well. The primary method of data collection was through open-ended, in-depth interviews. The findings of the study revealed that 100% of participants believed that ability grouping for high ability students was crucial to their success, and that teaching style and teacher expectations were also vitally important. The role of guidance counselors in helping this cohort to become motivated and engaged in their own education is addressed, as is the role of self-confidence in the achievement of gifted students. The effects of extra-curricular activities and acceleration are discussed as well. Finally, recommendations for educators of gifted students are offered, along with suggestions for further research.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background

Questions concerning the most effective strategies for teaching gifted students have not been answered with consensus in the education community. In fact, there is often contentious disagreement (Chiu et al., 2008; Gentry, Hu, Peters, & Riza, 2008; Gross, 2006; Perrone, Wright, Ksiazak, Crane, & Vannater, 2010). In searching the literature for guidelines pointing the way to high quality instruction for gifted learners, that which will motivate them to succeed, a cause for concern is twofold. First is the sparse amount of research directed toward discovering what these talented young people themselves believe to be most motivating and supportive of their own academic endeavors (Adams-Byers, Whitsell, & Moon, 2004; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Peterson, Duncan, & Canady, 2009). And secondly, why do so many of these potential bright stars fade?

Since the first programs specifically designed to group children of exceptional ability were instituted in St. Louis in 1868 (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2009), the efforts of school administrators and teachers to find the best approach for educating all students, including the gifted, have shifted from one to another of several systems. In the early 20th century, the idea that giftedness was based on intelligence test scores came to the forefront (McClellan, 1985), and this viewpoint predominated in the field of gifted education. In 1950, Guilford asserted that creativity is part of giftedness, leading to the design of tests measuring other abilities in addition to those measured by IQ tests (McClellan).



Of enormous impact in education around the globe was the publication of Howard Gardner's seminal work, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983). In this book, Gardner advances his theory of seven distinct intelligences. Since the publication of *Frames of Mind*, many educational and psychology studies have been done aiming to understand and measure a variety of abilities and talents, rather than simply that of the IQ. Educators more frequently today identify gifted students using tests for these multiple intelligences (Ely, 2010).

An event of profound influence in gifted education occurred in 1971 after Congress instructed the U.S. Commissioner of Education, S.P. Marland, to conduct a study of America's gifted and talented students with regard to the extent to which their needs were being met. The document sent to Congress containing the results of the study, *The Marland Report*, included a definition of giftedness that was, and still often is, used by states and school districts as the characterization of this group of children (Ely, 2010; NAGC, 2009). The Report stated that "Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who, by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance. These are children who *require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and the society*" [emphasis added] (Marland, 1971).

The shock of the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 reverberated not just within the education community, but around the world. In 1981, T.H. Bell, the Secretary of Education, appointed a National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). His mandate to the Commission was to assess the quality of the schools, primary, secondary, and post-secondary in the United States, and to compare these schools with those of other

highly developed countries around the globe. With the Commission's report, *A Nation at Risk*, the gloomy educational picture in this country and the forecast for our schools' future were clearly spelled out.

This report from the NCEE summed up its observations succinctly when it stated, ". . . the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (NCEE, 1983, p. 5). The report went on to declare that American students could not compete with their counterparts internationally, and that ". . . the ideal of academic excellence as the primary goal of schooling seems to be fading across the board in American education" (p. 14). When addressing the question of the quality of education being offered to the most able students, the report said that over half of gifted students in this country did not match their tested abilities with their achievement. Regrettably, this fact has been confirmed in recent years (Hoover-Schultz, 2005; Morisano & Shore, 2010). Although some researchers believe the number of underachieving gifted learners is less than 50%, all agree that the number is far too high (Hoffman, Wasson, & Christianson, 1985; Reis, 1998).

In its recommendations for the future of gifted education, *National Excellence* made the point that American society must recognize the value of our most talented young people, see the importance of their future leadership to the nation, and learn to appreciate intellectual and artistic achievement as much as high performance in sports or popular entertainment. The education community of the United States, the report asserts, must establish guidelines for recognizing the gifted and talented, assure that they are

exposed to challenging curricula, and provide high-level academic opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Equally important, the report states, is that teachers have the training necessary to ensure vital, appropriate instruction for the gifted, with the high expectations this cohort needs and deserves.

Although the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed by Congress in 2002, including within it the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, there are educators across the nation who still recognize large gaps between the potential of the country's most gifted students and what they actually are accomplishing.

*A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students* appeared in 2004, perhaps the most condemning of gifted education in the United States to date. Published by the University of Iowa, this national research-based report asserts that the gifted and talented students in the United States are being held back, denying them the opportunities for the superior education that their talents deserve (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004).

The debate on the most effective strategies for educating the nation's gifted and talented children continues into the 21st century. However, the majority of educational researchers agree that indeed gifted children are unique, and that therefore these talented students require unique methods in their academic experience (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Boone, 2008; Fiedler, Lange & Winebrenner, 2002; Manning, 2006; Monaco, 2008; Peterson, 2006, Rogers, 2007). The question to be decided by research is which system of delivering this unique learning is the most effective in motivating gifted students to seize

the opportunities before them and reach the accomplishment and fulfillment for which their abilities make them capable.

The primary concern of this researcher was to discover why some gifted students succeed to their full potential, while too many others never become really engaged in their own education. In this study, the emphasis was on effects of motivational strategies of the school's academic community, rather than on the potent influences of parents. "It is estimated that nearly half of gifted youth achieve significantly below their potential" (Morisano & Shore, 2010, p. 249), and other researchers have found that more than 75% of African-American gifted students are underachievers (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). From this group of talented underachievers educators should be able to discover reasons why they "turned off" to school early on, and never really found their way to the joys of learning. If the education community knows more of these reasons, courses and programs can be designed that will inspire more of our most able students to succeed. These are the young people that have the ability to become world leaders in many disciplines and therefore can be of great benefit to society. Somehow schools in the United States are reaching too few of them. This study attempted to find causes of this shortcoming and discern methods that will help more gifted students reach the heights their abilities will allow.

The theoretical framework for this study is that of Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and of Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Both of these theoretical bases concern the manner in which students learn to make choices, and the role of self-efficacy in their growth. Further explanation of both of these theories and their connection to this research will be found in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

## **Problem Statement**

The problem statement for this study is that a large number of gifted students do not reach the high levels of academic success of which they are capable (Kim, 2008; McCoach & Siegle, 2008; Rimm, 2003; Stoeger & Ziegler, 2005), and little empirical research exists attempting to find reasons for their underachievement (Morisano & Shore, 2010). Why do so many learners of high ability fail to perform to their potential? What can educators do to increase the percentage of this cohort who achieve successfully, benefitting themselves and the society in which they live?

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn, from the perceptions of the students themselves, why so many gifted students fail to achieve to their potential. The research attempts to discover which elements of their school experience these learners believe to be the most motivating and supportive, as well as those components the students find to be debilitating and frustrating.

## **Significance of the Study**

If educators are aware of strategies of instruction that inspire gifted learners in their quest to use their talents to rise to the level of academic success of which they are capable, then teachers and administrators can design curricula and methods of teaching that will increase students' desire to reach high. Some research has identified elements in their school experience that encourage gifted students and appeal to their unusual intellectual and creative abilities (Colangelo, 2004; Gavin, Casa, Adelson, Carroll, & Sheffield, 2009; Gross, 2006; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). It is hoped that this

study extends this body of knowledge, particularly on the question for which little research exists: that of the perceptions of the gifted students themselves.

In addition, if more is discovered about what encourages or discourages the learning adventures of highly able students, many of these lessons can be adapted and used for students of average ability as well as for those who have learning disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided this study:

1. What degree of influence do the various elements in their learning environment have on gifted students' desire (or lack thereof) to achieve to the best of their ability in their academic careers?

Educators must understand what highly able students perceive as those influences that inspire them to reach to their full potential, as well as grasp their perceptions of those influences that discourage them from scholarly pursuits. Research must find, *from the viewpoint of the gifted students themselves*, what instructional strategies and systems of grouping are the most advantageous, both academically and affectively.

2. What do gifted students perceive as the most and least helpful elements of their learning environment in developing self-confidence?

When young people feel that they have some control in their own lives, that they are capable of making good decisions with respect to their academic and social lives, they are more likely to pursue goals that will bring them to the top of their potential. Members of the academic community must find the most efficacious ways to help the gifted

develop feelings of self-worth and to be able to withstand negative peer pressure as they move along the path of life-long learning and the satisfaction of jobs well done. Here, the role of the teacher and particularly of the counselor should come into play (Gentry et al., 2008).

3. What do gifted students see as the most and least helpful elements in their learning environment in encouraging their desire to develop and excel in a future career?

Life does not end with graduation from high school, nor, in fact at college commencement. Educators must learn how to inspire students to want to continue to learn throughout their lives, and to find their own "niche." In their study of gifted students, Gentry et al. (2008) found that career awareness has not been given the emphasis and care it deserves for these highly able learners.

4. What elements in their learning environment have teachers identified as the most and least effective in motivating gifted students to strive to be the best they can be?

As teachers work with their talented students each day, they can identify strategies in their instruction that elicit the interest of these young people, as well as noticing influences from peers and family situations that either encourage them to reach high, or seem to deflate their wish to move ahead.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

**Limitations.** A possible limitation of this study is that it included only one participant who has graduated from school and moved into the world of work and therefore is able to look back and evaluate what helped and hindered him in his academic

career. At the same time, however, the researcher interviewed six students who are actually experiencing their school life right now and therefore did not rely on memory but rather on events as they were taking place in their daily lives.

**Delimitations.** In order to discover the elements of their school experience that are encouraging or discouraging to gifted students, the researcher limited the participants to six secondary juniors or seniors in addition to the one adult. Also, she chose four of these participants from among those who are achieving successfully, and two who are identified as underachievers. In addition, the adult is an underachiever.

### **Research Plan**

The research is a qualitative phenomenological study. This work continues on from and adds to the knowledge gained from studies of gifted students' perceptions of the effectiveness of various elements of their education as reported by Adams-Byers et al. (2004), Berlin (2009), Little, Kearney, and Britner (2010), Peterson et al. (2009), Shields (2002), and Trautwein, Ludtke, Koller, Marsh, and Baumert (2006). These investigations are among the relatively few that address the perceptions of gifted students themselves with regard to their school experience. Though the findings of qualitative studies are at times questioned because of small samples, a case or phenomenological study can often discover in-depth information that would not be realized in investigations with larger numbers of subjects (Slekar, 2005). Maxwell (2004) states that a strength of qualitative research is that it "relies fundamentally on an understanding of the *process* by which an event occurs, rather than simply a comparison of situations involving the presence and absence of the presumed cause" (p.9).



## **Definitions of Terms**

Terms central to this research are:

Gifted Learners:

" Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society" (Marland, 1971, p. 8). However, it is important to note that eminent researchers in the field of gifted education caution that "There is no single homogeneous group of gifted children and adults, and giftedness is developmental, not fixed at birth" (Reis & Renzulli, 2009, p. 233). In other words, those children in a group identified as "gifted" have a variety of abilities and talents that add up to their high level of potential.

Criteria for identifying gifted students vary within districts and states across the nation. These include aptitude and achievement scores, portfolio assessments, rating scales, teacher recommendations, performance records, and additional valid and reliable measurements such as end-of-year test scores, as well as IQ scores.

Achiever:

An achieving learner is one whose academic performance is commensurate with his or her scores on standard tests of ability and who sets and meets goals at the upper end of his ability level. A student achiever demonstrates excellence in his academic pursuits, usually performing above grade level in most subjects. In addition, this learner is

motivated by the desire to be highly successful in his school experience, and he succeeds in that desire. He has developed positive self-efficacy compared to that of his underachieving peers (Rubin & Reis, 2006). The high achiever usually plans to further his education at a post-secondary institution.

Underachiever:

"*Underachievement* is typically defined as a discrepancy between the child's school performance and some index of his or her actual ability, such as intelligence, aptitude, or creativity test scores or observational data" (Davis, Rimm, & Siegle, 2011, p. 288). The underachieving student has become disinterested in his education and finds no reason to put forth the effort and time needed to be highly successful, as he could be. This student often does just enough to earn average grades although he is capable of achieving much more. The gifted underachiever does not use his natural abilities to excel, but rather settles for "getting by." He often does not move on to college, or drops out if he does. This study attempted to find reasons for this lack of motivation on the part of some gifted students, and to address the problems illuminated by those reasons.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

Finding research that speaks to the most effective methods to use in offering a high quality education to gifted students is not difficult. In fact, hundreds of articles and books have been written reporting on studies that address this topic. However, there is no consensus on which strategies and systems most benefit gifted learners (Adelson & Carpenter, 2011; Delcourt, Cornell, & Goldbert, 2007). In addition, there is little research concerning the perceptions of gifted students with regard to their own school experience (Adams-Byers et al, 2004; Assouline, Colangelo, Ihrig, & Forstadt, 2006; Peterson, Duncan & Canady, 2009), nor can many studies be found concerning the large numbers of underachievers found in this cohort (Morisano & Shore, 2010). Adding to the lack of coherence in research on gifted education, there appears to be a disconnect between investigators interested mainly in the practical aspects of this topic, and those most interested in the theoretical (Dai, Swanson, & Cheng, 2011).

This study investigated, from the viewpoint of gifted students themselves, which elements in their educational experience have inspired their eagerness for successful learning, and which have frustrated and dampened this desire.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The framework for this study is that of Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), and of Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (ST). SCT encompasses the idea of triadic reciprocal causation for behavior. In this system, students, on the basis of personal factors, behavior, and environmental factors, come to the decisions and choices that

inform their academic careers and their later lives (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001). After thinking about what they have seen in their observations of other people and their environment, learners then combine these observations with their own cognitive processes and arrive at their outlook and behavior. Because SCT places cognition at the core of the theory, it is especially apropos for gifted students who learn to think at a high level.

Another element in SCT is the importance of students' development of self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 2001). Bandura believes that self-efficacy is the foundation for people's thoughts, feelings, and motivation for accomplishing goals. The curriculum for gifted learners must be rigorous and challenging so that these students may learn to depend on their own abilities and establish positive self-efficacy.

The Sociocultural Theory of Lev S. Vygotsky adds dimensions to SCT that are effective guides for designing research about gifted students. Vygotsky believed that children can be taught more effectively when they learn within a context of social interaction (Nye, 2007). Much research on highly able students emphasizes the importance of these learners being placed in groups of peers with similar talents so that they can learn from and be motivated by one another.

Other elements of ST that are right on target when designing curricula for gifted students are Vygotsky's theories of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding (Nye, 2007). Herein, students are presented new material that is just above their level of knowledge, and they are coached in this learning until they have mastered

the lesson and are ready to move on to the next level: their ZPD (McGlonn-Nelson, 2005).

## **Review of the Literature**

Four structures for arranging gifted students in school stand out in the literature: ability grouping, tracking, inclusion, and differentiation. In addition, acceleration of students of high ability is being investigated with more frequency in recent years. The limited body of literature that does exist regarding gifted learners' own perceptions about the efficacy of their education will be addressed, as well as the topics of methods of identifying gifted learners and that of teacher training. The underlying question of this investigation, that of looking for reasons for underachieving academic performance by a large number of high ability learners, will be discussed in the light of the aforementioned topics.

**Ability grouping.** Preckel and Brüll (2010) point out that one of the most hotly debated topics in education today is ability grouping as opposed to inclusion. Some researchers use the term *achievement grouping* rather than *ability grouping* (Adelson & Carpenter, 2011; Trautwein et al., 2006), but they make no distinction between the two terms which can be used interchangeably. Adelson and Carpenter define achievement grouping as "the process of teaching students stratified into classrooms or groups by skill, readiness, or ability levels" (p. 266). Inclusive classes, on the other hand, are heterogeneous in that they include students with a variety of ability levels. These are often referred to as *regular* or *general* classes.

Rogers (2002), in her report on 13 syntheses of studies of ability grouping of the gifted, identifies several types of ability grouping:

1. full-time gifted programs
2. small cluster groups of gifted within inclusive classes (led by a trained teacher of the gifted)
3. grouping for acceleration of the curriculum
4. grouping for enrichment in specific subjects
5. cross-grade grouping
6. pull-out programs for enrichment
7. within-class grouping by ability with differentiated learning materials
8. special schools for the gifted

In the conclusion of her report, Rogers writes that gifted students must be placed in some form of ability grouping in order to receive the level of instruction that is appropriate for them. She points out that unless all students in the class or group have the same general level of academic talent, the instruction offered cannot be of the challenging and motivating nature to which these high level students are entitled, and which will nurture their intrinsic abilities so that they may reach their own potential.

In her seminal study at the Prairie District School in Canada, comparing the effects of ability grouping on the gifted versus placing them in heterogeneous classrooms, Shields (2002) found that grouping the gifted in self-contained classes with peers of

similar talent was beneficial to the students not only academically but also in their perceptions of themselves as learners, and of their entire school experience. Robinson (2006) adds that when highly gifted children are not provided with the sort of advanced work that can be accomplished in homogeneous groups, they may be subject to underachievement and depression. This same conclusion is fervently championed by M.U.M Gross (2006) in her highly respected studies of the effects of grouping and acceleration on children of high ability.

The literature abounds with studies corroborating the finding that ability grouping has a salutary effect on the development of gifted students. Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer (2009) investigated 121 primary schools in Kenya. These researchers compared the academic achievement of students in 61 of these schools who were grouped for ability, with those learners in the remaining 60 schools who were assigned to general classes without regard to their prior academic performance. Duflo et al. state that the academic improvement of students who were grouped by ability was remarkable, in part, they found, because in homogeneous classrooms teachers are not required to divide their time and effort among learners who have widely disparate levels of ability.

In their study of the effect of ability grouping on reading growth among kindergarteners, Adelson and Carpenter (2011) found clear evidence of the efficacy of this strategy. Their conclusion is that students in kindergartens using ability grouping experience greater growth in their reading achievement than do those not grouped, and this improvement is even more marked if their groups are small. "Moreover," they say, "those effects are even greater for high-ability students, those who are in a gifted program in kindergarten" (p. 274). Therefore, these researchers point out that achievement

grouping is a potent program whose positive effects are notable with all students, regardless of their level of ability.

Condrón (2008), however, in his study of the effects of skill grouping on improvement in reading in elementary school, concludes that ability grouping is only helpful to high-ability learners. He states that those on the lower end of the ability scale, placed in lower-level groups, experience effects detrimental to their learning that would not take place if they were not grouped at all. In discussing the issue of closing the inequality of the achievement gap found in many schools, Condrón makes the point that he believes that indeed achievement grouping exacerbates this inequality, and that grouping benefits only the high-grouped students at the expense of the others in lower-level groups. The researcher suggests that rejecting achievement grouping would be a positive step in all children's education, and he makes the following statement in his discussion of the findings of his study: "If teachers were to abandon the use of skill grouping, students' achievement levels would likely become more equal. The reduction in inequality would come about through increased learning among low-grouped students and decreased learning among high-grouped students" (p. 387).

Some researchers believe that gifted education is "elitist," that students of high ability already have an advantage over other students, and do not need separate programs in addition to their native talents (Montgomery, 2007; Rinn & Cobane, 2009).

In sum, however, the large majority of educational researchers believe that ability grouping for the gifted is clearly a program that is not only beneficial intellectually to this cohort, but that it provides a significant opportunity for them to develop their talents to



their full potential (Brulles, Saunders & Cohn, 2010; Delcourt et al., 2007; Dimitriadis, 2011; Hornby, Witte, & Mitchell, 2011; Kettler, 2011; Linn-Cohen & Hertzog, 2007; McCoach, O'Connell, & Levitt, 2006; Miller, 2009; Reis & Morales-Taylor, 2010; Rogers, 2002; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). Summing up the verdict of the majority of research finding that indeed ability grouping contributes mightily to the academic success of gifted students, Tieso (2005) writes that her study substantiates such a conclusion. She states, "The results of this study support the research on high-achieving students, indicating that grouping by ability for specific instruction may result in significant achievement gains" (p. 78).

**Tracking.** Tracking, in contrast to ability grouping, is the system of placing students in a specific level of classes, for all of their classes, usually throughout their entire school year (Chiu et al., 2008; Trautwein et al., 2006). This placement is decided by a student's past academic record and by his or her I.Q. and other scores. Trautwein et al. (2006), in their notable study of tracking and student motivation, explain that they did their investigation in Germany because it has the most strictly tracked school system in Western developed nations. Their study was large, encompassing schools in 16 German states, and they collected data from 34,765 children, producing findings regarding academic achievement, self-concept, and interest in school. The data analysis found that students in the upper track scored higher in those areas than students in the middle track, while learners in the middle track scored higher than those in the lower track. Interestingly, the learners' self-concepts were not diminished by placement in a lower track, and in fact the study showed that children compare themselves more to peers within their track rather than to those in tracks above or below.

Chiu et al. (2008) found the same results, academically, when comparing within tracks rather than across tracks. However, these researchers believe that it is harmful to the self-esteem of students to be placed in lower tracks and that it would be more advantageous to them to be grouped in heterogeneous classes with more gifted students, since the expectations would be higher in mixed-ability groups

In a recent study by the Fordham Institute (Loveless, 2009), on tracking in Massachusetts middle schools, the researcher found that:

In the name of equity, gap closing, political correctness, and leaving no child behind, American education has been a bit too willing to neglect its higher-performing students and the school arrangements that best meet *their* needs. . . . Further, the vast majority of gifted children are placed in regular classrooms where most teachers are not trained in gifted education. In fact, thirty-six of forty-seven responding states don't require regular teachers to have training in gifted education at any point in their careers, nor do most teacher-preparation programs include coursework on gifted learners. That's more than unfortunate for high-achieving youngsters and the ill-equipped teachers who teach them, but it's also damaging to our long-term national interest. (p.3)

In their investigation of 121 primary schools in Kenya, mentioned in the previous section on Ability Grouping, Duflo et al. (2009) found that tracking is beneficial to all students regardless of what level of track they occupy. Each of the schools had been randomly selected as a part of the Extra-Teacher pilot program in that country and were thereby provided with an additional first grade teacher which allowed each school to

divide its first grades into two sections. At 60 of these schools, students were randomly assigned to one or the other of the first grades, while at the other 61 schools the assignments were made on the basis of the students' scores on exams taken the previous year. The children who had earned the lowest 50% of scores were placed in "the bottom class," and the remainder were placed into "the top class." After collecting data from the approximately 10,000 students in the 121 schools, the analysis found that the achievement by all of the students in the tracked schools, regardless of which track, was at a higher academic level than that of those in the heterogeneous classes, *and the tracked learners had a greater level of satisfaction with their school experience* [emphasis added]. This is a startling finding, and emphasizes the fact that teaching children in homogeneous classes allows them to learn at a pace and sophistication level that is most efficacious for their particular abilities.

In their qualitative study of two tracked gifted classrooms in California, Linn-Cohen and Hertzog (2007) found that these students not only achieved at high levels academically, but that they also felt stimulated by their learning environment and had a greater level of satisfaction with their education. The teachers in both of these settings felt that one of the advantages of tracking for these students of high ability, was that they (the teachers) had the freedom to design curriculum that was challenging to their students. These two teachers viewed the state and local standards as "the minimal level of competency for their students, not the benchmark for learning" (p. 251). They adapted the district's core curriculum and supplemented and enriched those standards so that the gifted students were receiving instruction appropriate for their high level of ability. The students in this study not only performed at an academic level predicted by their aptitude

and previous achievement, but they found several benefits in being tracked in homogeneous classes with peers of like ability. Among these benefits were an increased sense of satisfaction with their education, especially the fact that they were being challenged academically in a positive way. One student noted, "[being in a tracked program] is challenging because you have to be intelligent in this class all the time" (p. 254). Another stated, "all things are challenging, but in a good way" (p. 254).

When Ruth Wright Hayre, Philadelphia's first black high school teacher and principal, became principal of North Philadelphia's William Penn High School for Girls, she initiated far-reaching changes in the education of minorities in that city (Delmont, 2010). One of the most successful programs she started was the formation of "star groups" which tracked the most academically talented students, focusing on future college admission for these girls. Hayre was aware of the prevailing custom of tracking low income students and students of color into courses that "reproduced socio-economic stratification and limited their prospects for future employment or higher education" (p. 205). Hayre and the faculty of the school identified sixty students for the special "star groups" on the basis of their IQ and other scores, and their junior high school records. The idea was to give an opportunity for a superior education to girls who had been under-identified as having high ability because of their SES background and being members of a minority. Some observers felt that tracking these students would foster a certain snobbery because of their belonging to an elite track. Hayre's response:

Most of our students are from an environment which has done little but make them feel inferior, inadequate, and unable to rise very far above their present

situation. A bit of "snobbery," (shall we say of the positive kind?) disciplined by thinking and understanding teachers may be a "shot in the arm." (p. 212)

Hayre included for the "star group" track trips and assemblies meant to give the girls exposure to new cultural experiences, further readying them for the experiences ahead in higher education. This program and training helped to markedly increase the number of students applying to and being admitted to college.

Other researchers have corroborated this positive outcome for lower-level students who are placed in a low-tracked program, especially in the case of learners who are considered "at risk" (Schweiker-Marra & Pula, 2005). "At risk" students have been defined as those "in danger of failing to complete their education with the skills necessary to survive in a modern technological society" (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). Schweiker-Marra and Pula, in their longitudinal case study, placed 40 to 50 at-risk students in a tracked program. These students for the most part were from the lower socio-economic class and lived in non-permanent housing. This group contrasted sharply with the remainder of the student body of this middle school (population of about 500), most of whom were from upper-middle to upper class homes. In addition to the academic adjustments such as teaching techniques, emphasis on study skills, lessons on test-taking skills, curriculum adjustments, and special privileges accorded this cohort as a motivational strategy, a rigorous behavior management program was also instituted. After three years in this low-tracked program in middle school, the students had marked improvement in academic achievement, as well as increased self-esteem. Eradicating the necessity of competing with students of higher ability, at least originally, was another positive benefit of this tracking program.

It remains true, however, that some researchers, in the United States particularly, believe that tracking is undemocratic and detrimental to students in the lower tracks (Hornby et al., 2011; Kettler, 2011). These investigators point out that some schools in the United States are "implementing what is referred to as 'detracking,' which involves students being deliberately placed into classes of mixed ability" (p. 93). Many of the researchers who maintain that tracking is detrimental believe that if students with lower ability were placed in heterogeneous groups with gifted students, the achievement of lower-level students would improve. Though Chiu et al. (2008) agree with this outlook in some particulars, they conclude that their study did "not provide enough evidence to suggest that tracking should be eliminated in the public schools" (p. 134).

**Inclusion.** In education, "inclusion" refers to the practice of grouping children, regardless of their ability level, in the same classroom, so that all points on the ability spectrum are represented (Armstrong, D., Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2011; Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011). Students with disabilities and identified as in need of special education (SPED) services are placed in the same general classroom as those who are highly gifted, and with many levels of ability in between. The inclusion movement came to the forefront in 1975 with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which mandated that all students be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Other federal, state, and local legislation has followed, calling for equal treatment of all students regardless of their level of ability. Foremost in this group of statutes is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. Inclusion now is found in schools not just across the nation but also around the world.

Though the legislation mentioned above has been passed with the stated goal of reaching all students and helping them achieve to the best of their ability, research has often shown that this is not what is happening. Hopson-Lamar (2009) in the conclusion of her dissertation states that "while this purpose is quite significant, the interpretation of [the NCLB Act] has resulted in schools promoting the academic growth of low to average students, which excludes the academic growth of gifted students" (p. 48). This researcher goes on to call for an amendment of NCLB to include gifted and talented students.

As has been pointed out in foregoing pages of this dissertation, a relatively small group of researchers believes that gifted programs are undemocratic and unfair, and that learners of high ability should be placed in classrooms with children of varying abilities. However, the preponderance of the findings of educational researchers concludes that inclusion is a myth (Armstrong et al., 2011; Cooper, 2009). Many educators believe that heterogeneous classrooms have debilitating effects on the gifted, robbing them of the challenge for real learning that is afforded them when offered only curricula and teaching strategies at their own level. Hallahan and Kauffman (2006) write that those children with exceptionally high abilities should have instruction that is "commensurate with their talents" (p. 516). These education professors continue by stating that highly gifted students suffer boredom in inclusive groups, and that they must have the quality of education that will ensure their development to their full potential. Looked at in this light, isn't an inclusive classroom a restrictive environment for these very able children?

Speaking of inclusive classrooms with students of varying abilities making up the class population, Bellamy (2005) says that designing differentiated instruction for these gifted learners is crucial. "If the task is not sufficiently stimulating and challenging for

able students, boredom, underachievement and disillusionment are the least of the ill effects that can be expected" (p. 75).

Hertberg-Davis (2009) writes that homogeneous grouping of gifted students results not only in superior academic achievement but also in the students' own improved self-perceptions and attitudes toward school in general. Many studies have found that homogeneous settings are encouraging to high-ability students in their social and emotional development ( Dai & Rinn, 2008; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Peterson & Lorimer, 2011; Trautwein et al., 2006).

In the startling findings from her case study in an elementary school in Texas, Booher-Jennings (2005) declares that teachers in the school were employing a system that she refers to as "educational triage," a practice designed to help the school meet the demands of NCLB as well as those of the Texas Accountability System. In this scheme, teachers in inclusive classrooms weeded out students on the low end of the ability scale by recommending they move to SPED programs, thereby eliminating their requirement to take the same standardized tests as the other students. At the same time, teachers gave little attention to high ability learners, the students who could "make it on their own." The teachers' primary efforts and time were then spent with children who, with extra help, could pass end-of-course tests. The arrival of high-stakes testing and end-of-course test accountability has engendered in many teachers the belief that they must "produce" high test scores in order to earn the approbation of the administration of their school, district, and state, and to meet the requirements of NCLB. Booher-Jennings points out that "the equating of 'good teaching' with high test scores by the institutional environment and the



district shapes teachers' professional identities" (p. 233). In this system of educational triage, gifted students were virtually ignored.

In inclusive classrooms teachers are required to meet the educational needs of usually 20 to 30 students with extremely diverse abilities. Benson (2002) questions the expectation that one teacher can adequately meet such a challenge. This researcher goes on to write that in such a situation, most teachers will aim their instruction at the middle, frequently employing the gifted students in the room as peer tutors, or placing them in cooperative learning groups where they are expected to lead, and with which they often become frustrated. "Placing [gifted] students in classrooms where they face a chronic lack of challenge is inappropriate," says a Position Statement by the Association for the Gifted (TAG) (2005).

In order to inspire gifted students to develop a passion for their academic pursuits, and to help motivate them to live up to their potential, there are several avenues that can be explored by educators, including placing these learners in homogeneous classes surrounded by peers of like ability (Fredricks, Alfeld, & Eccles, 2010). In their discussion of fostering such passion, these researchers concur in the definition of passion established by Vallerand et al.(2005), stating that it is a strong inclination to be involved with an activity one likes, finds to be important, and in which one wishes to invest time and energy. In their 2010 study, Fredricks et al. "found that school settings, and especially regular classrooms as compared with gifted and advanced classes, appeared to undermine rather than support passion" (p. 18). These authors, in their interviews with gifted students, discovered several areas that the students pointed to as dampening their interest in their academic experiences:

1. A lack of challenge in many of their general classes.
2. Teachers who cater to students of lower academic ability in general classes.
3. Academic interests not being supported by peers in general classes.
4. Curriculum not geared to their ability level in general classes.

All of the gifted students with whom these researchers spoke reiterated that they were much more apt to find passion in their school work when they were in advanced classes with peers of similar ability and motivation, where teachers were enthusiastic about the advanced curriculum, where they were offered more opportunities for choice, and where they were offered more innovative instruction.

**Differentiation.** The term differentiation as used in the education community refers to the method used by teachers to modify the instruction they offer so that it meets the needs and level of ability of all students in their inclusive classrooms (Linn-Cohen & Hertzog, 2007). With legislation calling for the highest quality of education for every child, and with the increase of cultural diversity across the nations' schools, teachers find it imperative to differentiate, to the best of their ability, the instruction for those with varying backgrounds and talents. According to Tomlinson et al. (2003), in order for differentiated instruction to be effective it must be proactive, must employ the use of small groups, must use a variety of materials, must offer a varied pace of instruction, and must be learner-centered. These researchers speak to the task facing teachers in inclusive classrooms when they say, "We can dismiss neither the need to make classrooms a good fit for the full range of learners in them *nor the immensity of the challenge in doing so*" [emphasis added] (p. 25).

Manning, Stanford, and Reeves (2010) include in their article on differentiating instruction for the gifted the following quote from a general classroom teacher taken from a study by Manning (2005):

Teachers in the regular classroom are in a constant state of review, remediating for students that are weak. Higher-achieving students are lost in the shuffle and bored out of their minds. Most teachers need help in providing enrichment for those that don't need extra help. They do need challenging, but I don't feel I have the energy or the time, or the training!  
(p. 145).

Manning et al. conclude their essay by stating that in this era of accountability that results from high-stakes testing, teachers feel pressured to offer identical instruction to all students in their classes, regardless of each learner's level of ability.

Many journal articles and books promote a variety of specific ideas for enriching the curriculum for gifted students in an inclusive class through differentiation (Bellamy, 2005; Kaplan, 2007; McCollister & Saylor, 2010; Montgomery, 2007; Morgensen, 2011; Stoeger & Ziegler, 2010). These researchers contend that differentiation will provide gifted students with an appropriately challenging curriculum if lessons directed to these high-ability learners have been carefully designed to engage their interest and motivate them to want to learn what is being presented.

A representative example of the sort of differentiation espoused by the education researchers named in the preceding paragraph is Bellamy's (2005) method for teaching gifted and talented students in an inclusive 9th grade class studying *Macbeth*. Attempting

to avoid what she terms differentiation "by outcome" (p. 75), which Bellamy defines as simply recognizing that all students will do the same work with a variety of outcomes, she proposes strategies that will engage the higher-ability learner. Differentiation by text, or reading a complete play or novel rather than something condensed or on a worksheet, is one technique. The pace of the instruction is important as well: students of higher ability want to move along with little repetition.

A concrete suggestion made by Bellamy (2005) is that a play such as *Macbeth* could be read by the whole class, but then "tiered" assignments could follow the reading - in other words, "differentiation by task" (p. 78). In Act III, Scene i, the reader does not know Banquo's destination when he leaves the banquet. The gifted participants in this study were given the task of writing a letter that Banquo might have sent to a friend, telling of recent events. "Successful completion of this letter required careful, yet imaginative use of language, detailed knowledge of events and the ability to reflect Banquo's character and values through empathizing with his situation" (p. 78). The remaining students in the class were given the option of writing this same letter, or producing a personal diary entry from Banquo. Most students chose to do the easier diary assignment.

Of great importance in Bellamy's (2005) call for differentiating for gifted learners is the use of the opinion questionnaire after each unit of work. The high-ability students were asked to choose their preferred methods of instruction, and to explain which elements of their academic tasks stimulated and encouraged them to engage in the work. This, Bellamy explains, is very different from the whole class approach where everyone

is given the same lessons, the same tasks, and no one is asked about preferred strategies in teaching.

How, then, in this American melting pot, the inclusive school classroom, are the needs of the gifted and talented being met? Researchers have found that too often the overtaxed teacher, trying to meet this "immense challenge" simply hands extra tasks to her students of high ability and considers that she has met the requirements of differentiation (Evans, 2008). In the findings of their study of two homogeneous gifted classrooms in California, Linn-Cohen and Hertzog (2007) state that rarely is true differentiation offered to all students in an inclusive class.

**Acceleration.** S. L. Pressey's classic definition of "academic acceleration" is still in wide use today. He states that acceleration is "progress through an educational program either at rates faster than or at ages younger than conventional" (as cited in Colangelo et al., 2010, p. 182; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011, p. 39). Adding shades of meaning to the definition in a position paper on acceleration, the NAGC (2004) said, "Acceleration practices involve allowing a student to move through traditional educational organizations more rapidly, based on readiness and motivation" (p. 1).

The two major forms of acceleration are content-based acceleration and grade-based acceleration (Colangelo et al., 2010). These researchers go on to explain that content-based acceleration includes such strategies as single-subject acceleration, where a student takes, for instance, an AP course in one or more subjects, or curriculum compacting. In curriculum compacting, after a level of mastery of the general instruction is reached, a student will be provided with a more challenging set of lessons that make

better use of his time and talent. Curriculum compacting usually takes place within the general, inclusive classroom.

Another form of content-based acceleration is dual enrollment. In this program, a student takes the general curriculum for most courses but also attends one or more classes at a higher level when mastery at the general level has been demonstrated.

Colangelo et al. (2010) go on to describe various strategies in grade-based acceleration. These programs usually shorten the number of years that a student spends in primary and secondary school and can include "grade-skipping," and grade "telescoping" wherein a group of high-ability students is accelerated "through more than one year's curriculum in all academic areas, . . . so that 4 years [of high school] are completed in 3 years' time. Students fulfill credit requirements and graduate early" (p. 186). Early entrance to college is another example of grade-based acceleration. From the findings of this and other studies they have conducted, these researchers conclude that acceleration is unequivocally advantageous for gifted students, and that no evidence exists that acceleration has a negative effect on this cohort either emotionally or socially.

In their meta-analysis of 38 primary studies concerning the effects of academic acceleration on students of high-ability, Steenbergen-Hu and Moon (2011) found that the strategy does improve this group's academic achievement, and also that acceleration not only does not have a negative impact on their social/emotional development, but that it has a slightly positive effect, though not as large as that for academic achievement.

Many researchers are in agreement that acceleration is a strongly positive technique for use with gifted students (Colangelo et al., 2004; Duan, Shi, & Dan, 2010;

Gross, 2006; Gross & van Vliet, 2005; Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Peternel, 2010; Neihart, 2007; Noble, 2008; NAGC, 2004; Rogers, 2002; Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003; Thomas, (n.d.); VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). In addition, research has found that the gifted students themselves have feelings of accomplishment and self-worth when given the opportunity to move through the curriculum at a pace appropriate for their high-ability talents (Boazman & Saylor, 2011). In other words, when they are accelerated.

Occasionally in the literature the reader sees mention of concern with regard to the social and emotional adjustment of younger students being accelerated into classes of higher-level curriculum peopled by students older than the gifted accelerant (Hannah, James, Montelle, & Nokes, 2011). For the most part, however, researchers have found that students have positive experiences, emotionally and socially, when moving into higher levels of instruction appropriate for their ability and potential (Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). Hannah et al. (2011) conclude in their study of the effects of acceleration in tertiary mathematics, that social and intellectual support offered to younger learners being moved into courses with older classmates, would help to ameliorate the occasional difficulty of this sort.

In her prominent longitudinal study of 60 young Australians with I.Q.s of 160 or above, Gross (2006) came to astonishing conclusions. The majority of these young people spent their entire academic careers in classes where their age-peers had an average I.Q. of 100, thereby being forced to suffer through years of lackluster education which made them and their parents frustrated and unhappy. Among this group of 60, however, were a few who were educated by more enlightened minds, according to Gross, and these fortunate few were accelerated in their grade promotion, sometimes radically. Two case

studies of very gifted children who were radically accelerated are included in the article; both the researcher and the two students themselves believe that acceleration brought tremendous life-long benefits. Gross states, "I believe that all the young people . . . would have benefited greatly, both academically and socially, from grade advancement . . . . Sadly, only 17 were radically accelerated, and indeed, the majority . . . were retained with age peers for the duration of their schooling" (p. 412).

Gross's (2006) concluding remarks speak to her strong belief that educators should be willing, indeed eager, to encourage gifted young people to be all they can be. Acceleration, she has found, should be a central strategy in accomplishing this goal, with radical acceleration a given for those learners with the highest ability. "As educators, our goal should be to expand, rather than constrict, the academic and social worlds of gifted students, including the most highly gifted. Radical acceleration can provide a structured pathway to a developmentally appropriate placement" (p. 427).

**Identification of Gifted Students.** Although there is agreement in the education community that methods of identifying gifted children are not uniformly effective, particularly among those learners from minorities or low socio-economic status (SES), this is really the only area of agreement on this crucial topic, and the problem remains unresolved (McBee, 2010; Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassady, & Dixon, 2007; Schroth & Helfer, 2008). In fact, Borland (2008) emphasizes this perennial problem when he states, "The identification of gifted students is almost always the most controversial aspect of gifted programs in the public schools" (p. 261).



Underrepresentation of gifted students from the increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse population of America's classrooms is a particularly thorny dilemma in the area of identification (Chaffey & Bailey, 2008). Teachers too often have low expectations for the academic achievement of these learners, as well as for those from low SES backgrounds (Ryser, 2011). This researcher goes on to suggest that often teachers need further training in the characteristics and behaviors of highly able students before they will be able to accurately recognize giftedness where it exists.

In addition, the traditional IQ test does not produce accurate results for many minority, low SES, and ELL children. Research has shown that language-reduced, or nonverbal, tests should be the primary gifted identification vehicles for children with such backgrounds (Lohman & Gambrell, 2012).

In a recent national survey, it was found that a majority of states still rely heavily on the IQ test to identify giftedness. In some cases this test is the only criteria used for identification (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). In a national study that surveyed 900 public school educators, the findings showed that the majority believed that five methods of identification of the gifted are effective (Schroth & Helfer, 2008). These accepted techniques include standardized tests, teacher nominations, performance assessments, portfolios, and observations. However, there was no consensus concerning which items, or combination of items, were most efficacious. Disagreement exists, in fact, about just what constitutes giftedness. Is it successful intelligence, as proclaimed by some researchers (Sternberg, Grigorenko, & Jarvin, 2006), or is it another form of intelligence such as intellectual ability or creativity? Some teachers believe that good study habits and commendable behavior are part of being gifted (Neumeister et al., 2007). Adding to the

muddy waters of gifted identification is the fact that criteria for nominating students as gifted and talented vary from district to district across the nation, even within the same state (McBee, 2010).

In a large study conducted by the Georgia Department of Education, it was found that two characteristics have a serious negative impact on students in the process of identification of the gifted: belonging to a minority group and/or having a low SES background (McBee, 2010). Interestingly, this same study showed that while African-American or Hispanic students had a strikingly low probability of gifted identification, children of Asian descent had an increased probability.

The Talent Search model of finding and supporting students of high ability has become a major factor impacting the lives of hundreds of thousands of gifted learners, and is the primary alternative to the traditional school-based identification process in this country (Assouline & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2012; Pfeiffer, 2012). These authors explain that in gifted programs in schools, *selecting* children for special programs is the focus, whereas in the Talent Search world, the emphasis is on *discovering* such students and developing their talents.

The Talent Search model, which was begun at Johns Hopkins University by Dr. Julian C. Stanley in the 1970s, is fundamentally an above-level testing program. In these searches, young students take tests designed for students several years older than they. This approach is in distinct contrast to the school identification process wherein the IQ and similar tests are the focus, and which are designed to cater to the "all around" gifted student. The Talent Search has at its core the process of "identifying specific talents and

abilities [in gifted students] and nurturing them" (Assouline & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2012). In their article, these researchers conclude by stating that their own and other studies have demonstrated that indeed the Talent Search model is effective both in identifying gifted students and in providing research-based educational opportunities for this highly-able cohort.

Gentry et al., (2008) in their study of gifted students in an exemplary career and technical education center (CTE), concluded that too often students of high ability are steered away from vocational programs, despite the fact that they might have distinct talents and interests in that area. These authors add that even though talented students exist in every field of human endeavor, students of high intellectual ability often have been overlooked in the area of industrial arts. Gentry et al. concluded their experience at the career center with the observation that many of the gifted students they encountered there flourished in the educational environment aimed toward their nurture, and planned futures in these fields that were most meaningful to them.

The whole question of recognizing gifted and talented students is one that needs considerable further research and also needs to be more standardized across the United States (McBee, 2010; Sternberg et al., 2006). Although a plethora of opinions exists speaking to this problem, each champions its own ideas, and none of the "experts" agree in many particulars. Noted educators and researchers in the field of gifted education have published books and articles on the difficulties, and the necessity, of valid identification of highly able students, but to this date in the 21st century there is no consensus.

**Teacher Training.** "The fact that gifted education does not hold much prominence in teacher preparation programs is not a revelation" (Chamberlin & Moore, 2006). A relative lack of special courses in schools of education for teaching high-ability learners exists (Berman, Schultz, & Weber, 2012; Boone, 2008; Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2010; Gubbins, 2002; Loveless, 2009; VanTassel-Baska & Johnsen, 2007). Chamberlin and Moore state that where any mention of gifted education does occur in a teacher preservice course, it is often simply a discussion lasting an hour or two. In addition, many researchers have found a similar dearth of courses preparing teachers for the challenges of the inclusive classroom (Johnsen, Haensly, Rysler, & Ford, 2002). VanTassel-Baska and Johnsen have called for a significant increase in these offerings in colleges and universities. Additionally, these researchers argue vigorously for the adoption of written standards for teacher education in gifted learning by all states. VanTassel-Baska (2009), in a later article, calls for ". . . trained teachers who have met the standard of 12 hours of coursework in gifted education and content-based preparation. . . ." (p. 267).

Interestingly, it has been found by some investigators that it is common in teachers in Europe, Australia, and the United States to harbor negative attitudes toward their gifted students (Geake & Gross, 2008). They point out that these teachers may oppose special programs for intellectually gifted students, while they have no objection to the same accommodations for students talented in art, music, or theater. These researchers believe that educating teachers concerning the nature of highly able young people would help them to accept the differences in these students.

Bangel, Moon, and Capobianco (2010) in the introduction to their study investigating preservice teachers' experiences and perceptions in a gifted education training model, state that because of tighter budgets in school districts and because of the prevalence of inclusive classrooms, large numbers of highly able students are receiving most, and in many cases, all, of their academic education in general classrooms with teachers who have not been trained in gifted education. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of two training techniques that were designed to increase the preservice teachers' grasp of the characteristics and needs of gifted learners. The participants in the study were preservice teachers in an elementary education program who had elected to take a gifted education course and to teach in a Saturday enrichment program at a doctoral-degree granting university. The Saturday program was designed with small classes of students identified as high-ability learners, and included courses in math, science, technology, engineering, humanities, and the arts. The course in which all of the preservice participants were enrolled was *Introduction to Gifted Education*, and the Saturday program served as a practicum, guided by coordinators knowledgeable in the education of the gifted.

At the conclusion of this study Bangel et al., (2010) reported assertions made by several participants. The preservice student-teachers believed their understanding of the needs and characteristics of gifted students had increased; they felt that their level of confidence had increased in teaching gifted students, and in their overall teaching abilities; they perceived the practicum as a realistic teaching experience; they believed the whole program to be a valuable learning experience. The investigators conclude that more research should be done in the area of preservice teacher training for the gifted so

that more teachers will be prepared to offer high-ability students the challenging curricula they need, and that the instruction will be delivered in a manner appropriate for this talented group.

"Too few teachers are provided with good opportunities to gain expertise in working with gifted learners either in their preservice training or in readily available professional development" say researchers Matthews and Foster (2005). These writers suggest a third strategy for training teachers of the gifted in addition to preservice and inservice offerings. Matthews and Foster believe that a gifted education consultant could work with classroom teachers who have students of high-ability by offering development workshops, consulting with teachers individually, and assuring that teachers are in touch with programs and experts that will advance their knowledge of gifted students.

In the report of their study of cognitive and motivational characteristics of effective teachers in gifted programs, Hong, Greene, & Hartzell (2011) identify traits of these successful instructors:

1. they have expertise and in-depth knowledge of their subject matter
2. they employ effective teaching methods aimed for gifted learners
3. they provide student-centered learning environments
4. they have a sense of humor
5. they are willing to make mistakes
6. they are self-confident and enthusiastic

7. they are open and flexible

8. they are achievement-oriented and often are creative thinkers

Though researchers have diverse ideas concerning the best method for training teachers to instruct gifted students in ways that are most appropriate for these learners of high ability, there is consensus that more research must take place in order for the problem to be solved. Whether it is more university courses offered to prospective teachers, more inservice, seminars, and workshops speaking to strategies for offering quality instruction to the gifted, or some form of gifted education consulting, too little is being done now to meet the needs of these students who have the potential to be future leaders of our world (Colangelo et al., 2004).

**Gifted students' perceptions concerning their school experience.** As mentioned at the beginning of this Review of the Literature, the amount of research speaking to the perceptions of gifted students concerning their own educational experiences is sparse. In their study investigating the preferences of gifted learners themselves, Adams-Byers et al. (2004) asked questions about academic programming, degrees of academic challenge, and social adjustment. The purpose of their study was to look at what the gifted students perceived as the academic and social advantages or disadvantages of homogeneous grouping as opposed to heterogeneous classes.

The participants in this work were 44 students taking part in a summer program designed for the gifted and talented at a Midwestern university. Interviews and open-ended questionnaires were the methods of data collection, followed by cross-case, constant comparison analysis. The findings of the study revealed that the large majority

of students, about three quarters of the group, found pronounced academic advantages in homogeneous classrooms, while, somewhat to the surprise of the researchers, the majority of the participants preferred heterogeneous groups for social and emotional comfort.

One explanation for the importance of a study done by Preckel, Gotz, and Frenzel (2010) is that it was a longitudinal investigation. In some other studies of shorter duration, the findings have shown that when gifted students are moved from the general classroom to a homogeneous group of peers of like ability, the self-confidence of those students suffers a negative impact (Marsh, Hau, & Craven, 2004). Researchers attribute this decline in self-perception to the big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE), which arises when a student who has been outstanding academically in a general classroom, suddenly is placed with others of similar high ability, and therefore is no longer the shining star of the group.

However, in the longitudinal work of Preckel et al. (2010) the researchers discovered that over time the BFLPE fades, and gifted students find themselves feeling pride in their being placed in a high-level class; their academic self-confidence begins to return. In addition, the amelioration of boredom because of the more challenging curriculum offered in gifted classrooms is another positive perception of the high-ability learners in these groups. Though some studies have shown little difference in levels of boredom among students in general classes and those in ability-grouped rooms (Goetz, Preckel, Pekrun, & Hall, 2006), Preckel et al. found that the reasons for boredom were quite different in the two groups. Overall, gifted students reported boredom due to being underchallenged, whereas students of lower ability reported boredom due to being



overchallenged more frequently. These authors go on to state that the fact that "gifted students' boredom due to being underchallenged decreased after their transition to the special gifted class can be interpreted as a positive argument for ability grouping, since challenge is one important aspect of (gifted) students' perceptions of classroom quality" (p. 468).

Participants in a well-known study by Shaunessy, Suldo, Hardesty, and Shaffer (2006) were 301 students, 122 of whom were enrolled in an International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) program designed to challenge children of high ability with a curriculum appropriate for such students. The IB Diploma Programme is aimed toward the cognitive needs of gifted and high-achieving learners through acceleration, giving this cohort the opportunity to learn advanced content and skills at grades or ages earlier than the norm. Of the 122 students in the IB program, 33 were identified as gifted and 89 as high-achieving. The remainder of the 301 participants were 179 students in general education classes in the same public high school in the Southeastern United States. To measure school functioning and perceptions, the School Climate Scale and the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children were administered.

The overall findings of the study by Shaunessy et al. (2006) concluded that students who participated in an IB program "possess similar or superior levels of psychological adjustment relative to their general education peers" (p. 84). The students of high ability in the IB classes expressed more positive perceptions of the majority of components of school climate than did their peers in general education. The IB students also reported no higher levels of internalizing problems than did their general education schoolmates, and the IB learners had fewer externalizing symptoms. Another interesting

finding of this study is that the "gifted learners reported the highest levels of happiness with their friendships" (p. 85).

In their 11-year longitudinal study of life and school experiences of gifted students, Peterson et al. (2009) interviewed learners newly graduated from high school. The participants answered questions concerning their overall reaction to events in their lives during their school years. The central finding from the study was that most of the gifted graduates agreed that though they experienced negative events in these years, the stress they felt most was from challenges at school, not life events. Academic pressures, social relationships, school transitions, and overcommitment were stressors for gifted learners. However, for the most part these gifted students were able to live with stress and perform well academically.

Peterson et al. (2009) suggest that future research might include gifted children throughout their school careers, rather than at the end as in this study. They further suggest that a scale could be used to compare prevalence of negative life events, including both achievers' and underachievers' reactions to a variety of life events. They believe that it would be helpful to the education community to include as participants gifted students *and* the broader school population, and gifted students should come from a variety of cultural groups.

Several studies have emphasized the efficacy of allowing gifted students to accelerate at a much higher rate than is usually the norm, and for creating special schools housing only students identified as gifted or as high achievers (Boazman & Saylor, 2011; Colangelo et al., 2004; Jin & Moon, 2006; Gross, 2006). Jin and Moon point out that

their study gives support to the practice of special gifted high schools in creating satisfaction with their school experience among this cohort, in fact finding that the participants all had higher satisfaction with their education across the board.

The participants in Boazman and Saylers (2011) investigation were one to five years past their time as students at the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science (TAMS). All of these learners had been accelerated into an early college entrance program and all indicated that the experience had been extremely salutary and that they were "already leading a good life" (p. 82). The researchers go on to say:

The results of this investigation show that these early college entrance participants generally have above-average well-being and the data support a speculation that the early entrance may have contributed to their positive profiles. The findings are consistent with previous findings that the high-ability students who are accelerated academically are not affected negatively by the acceleration and that the acceleration may actually improve their social and psychological adjustment. (p. 82)

M.U.M Gross (2006), a premier researcher in the field of gifted education, quotes several of the participants in her study of perceptions of accelerated gifted students. All of those who accelerated speak in glowing terms of the effects of their experience, one saying, "I cannot even begin to imagine how desperate I would have felt to be left with my age peers. The best way to describe how I anticipate I would have felt is to say that if I hadn't accelerated I would have suffocated. . . ." (p. 426).

**Underachievement.** Recent research on gifted education is judged by many leaders in the field to be "fragmented, contested, porous rather than unified, insular, and firmly policed" (Dai, Swanson, & Cheng, 2011, p. 126). Further, VanTassel-Baska (2006) argues that, other than *acceleration* and *ability grouping*, topics within the area of gifted education have not elicited key ideas to advance, nor have they inspired research that promotes effective policy development or practice.

Though *underachievement* has received more attention from investigators in recent years, understanding of this phenomenon continues to be hampered by lack of consensus on the most effective methods of measurement and the hurdle of finding large groups of students who have been identified as both gifted and underachieving (Matthews & McBee, 2007).

In the report of their study of gifted students' attributions about academic success and failure, Assouline et al. (2006) did not include the roles of teaching style and effectiveness, curricula, grouping, and inclusion. These possible influences on the academic encouragement or discouragement of students are not among the choices given the 4,901 high-ability participants in the non-open-ended items on the questionnaire they were asked to complete. Those students who had been identified as both gifted and underachievers gave only three main reasons for their relative failure academically: "did not work hard enough," "not doing work the right way," and "the task was hard" (p. 289). The questionnaire used in the study did not include possible answers that touched on motivational approaches by teachers, curricula designed to challenge and interest gifted students, or the grouping with peers of similar ability among the choices.

Several educational researchers have suggested that causes of underachievement can be separated into two major categories: environmental (school factors) and personal/family factors (Hoover-Schultz, 2005). Other investigators have argued that "Because school environment is the variable that is most readily modifiable by school personnel, its effects on the achievement or underachievement of gifted children seem particularly worth studying" (Matthews & McBee, 2007). In their study of a group of students attending a summer program resulting from a talent search, those students who had been identified as underachievers in their home schools became very successful academically when exposed to the challenging curriculum and peers with similar ability in the summer program. Matthews & McBee conclude that changes in the curricula offered to gifted students can result in these students becoming achievers and performing up to potential.

An interesting point speaking to the number of underachieving gifted students in the upper grades of secondary school and those in the first years of college has been made by Balduf (2009). This investigator says that because the high-ability students could perform well so easily in earlier grades, many have never been taught how to work through challenging issues. When these students do finally meet curricula that is rigorous, often they are unprepared to deal with it, they flounder and are in danger of joining the ranks of those identified as underachievers.

The study reported in this dissertation speaks to the influences in the school and how those factors might be changed in order to have a more beneficial effect on highly able learners. In other words, what elements in the school environment do gifted students find to be the most encouraging and which elements are discouraging?

Several factors in school environments have been found by researchers as causes of underachievement in gifted students:

1. belief that gifted kids will "make it on their own" and don't need special gifted programs (Barger, 2009; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Delisle, 2010, p. 53; Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 2002; Manning et al., 2010; Mendoza, 2006; Monaco, 2008; Montgomery, 2007; Spielhagen & Cooper, 2005).

2. belief that acceleration is emotionally harmful to gifted students (Boazman & Sayler, 2011; Charlton, Marolf, & Stanley, 2002; Colangelo et al., 2004; Colangelo et al., 2010; Delisle, 2010; Gross, 2006; Lee et al., 2010; Neihart, 2007; Southern, 2010; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011; Wood, Portman, Cigrand, & Colangelo, 2010).

3. belief that ability grouping is not necessary for gifted students to meet their highest potential; that their needs can be met in an inclusive class with differentiation (Adelson & Carpenter, 2011; Brulles et al., 2010; Burney, 2010; Delcourt et al., 2007; Dimitriadis, 2011; Gross, 2006; Kettler, 2011; Matthews & McBee, 2007; Miller, 2009; Neihart, 2007; Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Morales-Taylor, 2010; Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Rogers, 2002; Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003; Tieso, 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2009).

4. belief that the rigor of the curricula offered to high ability students is not of great importance; ignoring the issue of "boredom" (Balduf, 2009; Bisland, 2001; Brody, 2005; Burney, 2010; Caraisco, 2007; Gavin et al., 2009; Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006; Hansen & Toso, 2007; Hébert, 2001; Matthews & BcBee, 2007; Matusevich, O'Connor,

& Hargett, 2009; McCollister & Saylor, 2010; Montgomery, 2009; Seeley, 2004; Thompson & McDonald, 2007).

5. belief that most students of minority groups, different cultures, and/or those from lower SES backgrounds are not gifted (Bonner, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, & Hill-Jackson, 2009; Burney, 2008; Chaffey & Bailey, 2008; Cigman, 2006; Cross, 2009; Elhoweris, 2008; Ford et al., 2008; Grantham, 2011; Jarvis, 2009; Lohman & Gambrell, 2012; McBee, 2010; Ryser, 2011; van der Westhuizen, 2007).

8. belief that teachers and guidance counselors do not need special training in understanding and teaching gifted learners (Bain, Bliss, Choate, & Brown, 2007; Caraisco, 2007; College Counseling for High School Students, 2010; Curby, Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, & Konold, 2008; Dimitriadis, 2011; Gallagher, 2001; Geake & Gross, 2008; Gilson, 2009; Graffam, 2006; Hargrove, 2010; Hertberg-Davis, 2009; Kim, 2010; Loveless, 2009; Mendoza, 2006; Miller, 2009; Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009; Sisk, 2009; VanTassel-Baska, 2009; VanTassel-Baska & Johnsen, 2007; Wood, 2010; Wood, Portman, Tarrell, Cigrand, & Colangelo, 2010).

9. belief that individual learning styles need not be considered when designing instructional strategies (Bellamy, 2005; Davis, Rimm, & Siegle, 2011; Montgomery, 2009; Rayneri, Gerber, & Wiley, 2003).

10. belief that gifted programs are elitist and undemocratic (Cooper, 2009; Fiedler et al., 2002; Geake & Gross, 2008; Rinn & Cobane, 2009; Spielhagen & Cooper, 2005).

11. belief that Response to Intervention is an appropriate concept for gifted learners (Delisle, 2010; McKenzie, 2010).

12. social pressure some gifted learners feel to "hide their light" (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012; Hébert, 2006; Hoover-Schultz, 2005; Neihart, 2006; White, Sanbonmatsu, Croyle, & Smittipatana, 2002).

13. negative attitude of some teachers toward gifted students (Davis et al., 2011; Geake & Gross, 2008; Kim, 2008).

14. failure to teach gifted students to set personally motivating goals and work toward them (Morisano and Shore, 2010; Neihart, 2006; Schick & Phillipson, 2009).

15. failure to teach gifted students the use of study and organizational skills (Balduf, 2009; Baslanti & McCoach, 2006; Stoeger & Ziegler, 2005).

16. failure to allow gifted students the opportunity for self-direction in their own education (Hargrove, 2005; Phillips & Lindsay, 2006; Stoeger & Ziegler, 2010; Thompson & McDonald, 2007).

## **Summary**

The fact that there is so little research on the thoughts, ideas, and perceptions of gifted students points powerfully to the need for further studies in this area. The hope of this researcher was to add to the base of knowledge concerning these exceptionally able and often neglected students by discovering what in their education is most encouraging to them in meeting their potential, and what elements are stultifying to their development academically, socially, and emotionally.



## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the ideas and perceptions of gifted students concerning the dynamics of their own education. Especially of interest to this researcher was why some of these highly able young people succeed in school, academically, socially, and emotionally, while others, equally talented, flounder and never live up to their capabilities. The study sought answers regarding the elements of their academic experience that this cohort found to be stimulating to their desire to achieve to their full potential. Equally important, the study also sought to discern those components of their schooling that the gifted participants found to be discouraging and frustrating.

This chapter of the dissertation describes the research design and restates the research questions for the study. The chosen participants are delineated, as well as the settings of the investigation. The researcher's role and background are discussed. The methods of data collection and analysis are covered, and the chapter concludes with addressing trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

### **Research Design**

This study has a qualitative phenomenological design. The specific approach used was an empirical phenomenological model, meaning that open-ended questions and dialogue were used in personal interviews with the participants in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon being investigated (Giorgi, 2008;

Moustakas, 1994). In this work, the phenomenon in question was the perception of gifted students regarding their educational experiences.

Phenomenology was chosen for this study because it is the method of choice if attempting to discover the subjective experience of the participants, and the meaning, to those participants, of the elements that make up that experience (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006; Patton, 2002). The research attempted to arrive at knowledge concerning the reasons that some gifted learners reach high and attain their goals, while others slouch through their school days, never reaching their own potential. In his seminal work, Moustakas (1994) points out that "The aim [of phenomenological research] is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience" (p. 13).

By listening carefully to the perceptions of the participants, and discussing their insights and understandings with them, then by carefully analyzing the data through in-depth study of the transcripts of interviews, the meaning of their experiences became clear. By moving from the details, or data pieces, to themes and constructs when analyzing the data, the researcher was able to get closer to the core of the "essence" depicted by Moustakas (1994).

An additional motive for using phenomenology is that it is common for the participants to be found at varying sites in that study design (Ary et al., 2006). Because the plan of this study included students at two different secondary schools as well as one

adult who lives in another locality, in addition to some of their teachers, the phenomenological model was apropos.

The following research questions guided this study:

**Research Question 1:** What degree of influence do the various elements in their learning environment have on gifted students' desire (or lack thereof) to achieve to the best of their ability in their academic careers?

The education community must understand what highly able students perceive as those influences that inspire them to reach to their full potential, as well as grasp their perceptions of those influences that discourage them from scholarly pursuits. Research must find, *from the viewpoint of the gifted students themselves*, what instructional strategies and systems of grouping are the most advantageous, both academically and affectively.

**Research Question 2:** What do gifted students perceive as the most and least helpful elements of their learning environment in developing self-confidence?

When young people feel that they have some control in their own lives, that they are capable of making good decisions with respect to their academic and social lives, they are more likely to pursue goals that will bring them to the top of their potential. Educators must find the most efficacious ways to help gifted learners develop feelings of self-worth and to be able to withstand negative peer pressure as they move along the path of life-long learning and the satisfaction of jobs well done. Here, the role of the teacher and particularly of the counselor should come into play (Gentry et al., 2008).

**Research Question 3:** What do gifted students see as the most and least helpful elements in their learning environment in encouraging their desire to develop and excel in a future career?

Life does not end with graduation from high school, nor, in fact at college commencement. Educators must improve their knowledge of how to inspire students to want to continue to learn throughout their lives, and to find their own "niche." In their study of gifted students, Gentry et al. (2008) found that career awareness has not been given the emphasis and care it deserves for these highly able learners.

**Research Question 4:** What elements in their learning environment have teachers identified as the most and least effective in motivating gifted students to strive to be the best they can be?

As teachers work with their talented students each day, they can identify strategies in their instruction that elicit the interest of these young people, as well as noticing influences from peers and family situations that either encourage them to reach high, or seem to deflate their wish to move ahead.

## **Participants**

The ten participants for this project included seven students or former students identified as gifted and chosen purposively, meaning that they were selected by the administrators of the schools involved, on the basis of their identification as gifted, rather than at random (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Specifically, a criterion sampling strategy was used to select the participants, wherein "All participants must meet one or more criteria as predetermined by the researcher" (Bloomberg & Volpe, p. 191). In this case,

those criteria were that all students chosen would have been identified as gifted, and that some would be identified as "achievers" and others as "underachievers."

Four student participants were high achieving juniors or seniors in high school. Two were identified as gifted but underachieving juniors or seniors in high school. The remaining student/subject was an adult male who has finished his academic career. He was selected by the researcher because she knew of his profound giftedness and of his underachieving school experience. Four of the student participants were female. The other two students and the adult were male. Some of the subjects were African-American, some Caucasian, and some were originally from cultures other than that of the United States.

The criteria for identifying learners as gifted and talented are clearly laid out by guidelines written by the school district in which all participants except the graduated adult were students. Because both high schools involved are in the same district, the criteria are the same for all students. These include nationally recognized individual and group aptitude and achievement tests; records of previous achievements; assessments of student products; appropriate rating scales, checklists, and questionnaires; and additional valid and reliable measures such as end-of-course test scores. The researcher obtained the city's printed guidebook for identifying gifted students from the school district's office of the Director of Testing, Guidance, and Gifted (See Appendix E for the school district's criteria in identifying gifted students).

In this school district, at least one staff member at each school is trained in the identification of gifted students. Screening begins in kindergarten and continues through

grade 12. Referrals for gifted learners are accepted at any grade level, followed by a staff eligibility meeting to determine which of the students referred meets the criteria for gifted and talented in the district.

The adult participant was identified as gifted and talented early in school. He is a man who is profoundly gifted (I.Q. score of 185 while in the first grade, measured by a professional clinical psychologist), but who "turned off" to school early in the primary grades. He dropped out of college, has attempted several different career paths, none of which have really worked out for him. He was, until recently, out of work and obviously depressed with his life situation.

Three teachers who instructed the high school participants agreed to take part in the study and were interviewed. Two of the teachers were female and one was male.

### **Sites**

Two schools were chosen for this research study. One is a small (about 100 students) specialized institution located in a southern state, Riverside School. This specific school was chosen because all of the students enrolled have been identified as gifted. All of the students at Riverside are in either their junior or senior year of high school. The state provides 10 such schools within its borders, each serving from five to seven surrounding counties, and each devoted to a curriculum tailored for learning in specific disciplines. All students spend the morning hours at Riverside and are transported by bus back to their home districts for the afternoon hours. Each student is chosen by a selection committee in the surrounding districts, and their tuition for the

special gifted and talented school is paid by the school divisions. The school employs six teachers.

The demographic makeup of this institution includes students who are 68% Caucasian, 12% African-American, 11% Asian, and 8% other ethnic groups. There is little diversity in socioeconomic status (SES) compared to the home schools, with the majority of students from the middle class.

It can be assumed that Riverside will meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as required by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Scores on end-of-course tests are much higher than the state and national averages. In this school, students are encouraged to reach for a lofty standard. At commencement time, a list of colleges that graduates will attend is published in the city's newspaper with the school being represented at highly selective colleges and universities throughout the nation. 100% of each graduating class at Riverside goes on to college.

Riverside was chosen because all of the students enrolled have been identified as gifted and because it has a reputation of excellence. The principal holds the Ed.D. and has had experience at school and district levels helping to plan the education of highly able students and also designing curricula most appropriate for this cohort. The principal was careful in his selection of potential participants, and also in the choice of teachers who would be interviewed.

The second school that was a setting for this study is a large (about 1,100 students) high school located near Riverside High, and in the same school district. This school, Oak Grove High School, holds grades 9 - 12. The student body is comprised of

540 males and 567 females from 38 different countries. There are 71 teachers on the faculty.

Aside from the extremely diverse backgrounds geographically of the students at Oak Grove, they also are from diverse ethnic cultures. One Native American attends the school, and 55.2% of the population is African-American. 3% of the students are Asian, 2.7% are Hispanic, and 38.5% are Caucasian. The socio-economic status (SES) of the student body varies from the lower end of the spectrum to the upper levels of SES.

A large number of Advanced Placement courses are offered at Oak Grove, but the majority of classes offered are inclusive, or heterogeneous. Four students at this institution were participants in the study: two were identified as gifted high achievers, and two identified as underachieving gifted students.

Although Oak Grove is a large school with a diverse population, there seems to be a feeling that excellence is a goal to strive for, a circumstance not always found in public high schools across the United States. The school is sparkling clean, the halls are peopled by students who behave in a fairly circumspect way, as if they are aware of expectations for their conduct. Students spoke of the school with pride as being "outstanding," and several teachers commented that the administration has high expectations for performance of both students and faculty. This researcher was impressed by the knowledge and professionalism of the teachers with whom she spoke.

Oak Grove was chosen for this study because it represents the diverse population we live in, and because the talented students enrolled there are offered a chance to succeed at a high level of academic endeavor in some of their classes. The administrators



at this school spent considerable time working with the researcher to be sure the choice of participants met her criteria.

In both of the schools in which the study was done, this researcher was given a room which afforded privacy for her and the participant being interviewed, but which also allowed discussions to be seen, though not heard. In one school, the room in which interviews were conducted was an empty classroom; the student and the researcher sat near the open door of the room. In the second case, the room used was just off of a busy multi-purpose area; it had glass walls, so the door was closed in order to keep out the noise of activity just outside. In both cases, the privacy, yet openness, gave the students confidence in interviews being confidential, yet also the feeling that they were not sequestered with a stranger off in some closed and relatively inaccessible area.

Interviews with teachers took place either in his or her office or in another available space that had the same juxtaposition of privacy and openness as did those for interviews with students.

In the case of the adult graduate, the researcher traveled to another state to meet with him for two face-to-face interviews of about 45 minutes each. In addition, in two phone conversations of about 15 minutes each, the interviews were concluded.

### **Researcher's Role/Personal Biography**

In 25 years of teaching, this researcher has watched with delight as highly able students grasped the opportunities available in school, became immersed in courses and activities that intrigued them, and later went on to college and pursued productive careers. She also, however, has seen the darker side of the coin. Too many gifted

students, nearly half of those identified as gifted and talented (Morisano & Shore, 2010), stumble in their years in school, becoming underachieving, often rather unhappy people. A central question the study attempted to answer was "Why? What makes the difference?"

This researcher has taught students with abilities across the spectrum, from those with learning disabilities to those with profound intellectual gifts. She has designed and taught courses for lower level learners, and for the gifted, as well as college preparatory courses meant for general students. Included in the classes she taught were AP English and AP U.S. History, Honors classes, and a freshman composition course taught to advanced high school seniors for Western Carolina University. Among her most meaningful and joyous teaching experiences were classes for students who had impoverished backgrounds and who had had little success in school. She has taught in both private academies and large public high schools. She loves the classroom and the young people who populate it.

While teaching and attempting to solve the riddle of gifted underachievers, this researcher and her colleagues studied the literature, discussed underachievers' problems among themselves, and with counselors and administrators. Though obviously eager to help these young people, counselors too often have not had the training necessary to connect with gifted students. Guidance counselors need special preparation for dealing with these special children (Wood, Portman, Cigrand, & Colangelo, 2010). For instance, many highly gifted learners are anxious about admitting the need for any sort of help; they are busy "protecting an image of excellence" (Peterson, 2006, p. 47). The researcher and fellow teachers tried a variety of strategies with the goal of motivating stumbling

students to become enthusiastic about their own education, but too often to no avail. This investigator has seen profoundly gifted young people graduate from high school, make a stab at college, drop out, and meander from one uninteresting job to another. Finding little in the literature that pointed to solutions for these troubled souls, the researcher had a powerful desire to find some of these answers from the students themselves - to make a difference in the lives of these very gifted, but misguided, young people. The word "misguided" is used with purpose: somewhere along the line these highly able young learners were not receiving the kind of guidance that might help them to "turn on," to become interested, even excited, about learning, and to reach the sort of productive and contented life of which they are capable.

The researcher admits to a bias in favor of strong programs for gifted students, for ability grouping, and for the use of strategies that will challenge, intrigue, and enrich the lives of these young people, including radical acceleration. She believes, based on her own experience and on extensive reading in the literature, that too often the gifted are left to their own devices, with the time and energy of faculty and administrators being spent on those children who need special education and on those who, with some extra help, will pass the state end-of-course tests. She was particularly careful not to attempt to "lead" participants when interviewing them, to avoid trying to get them to say what the researcher wanted to hear. She also used member checks, wherein participants were invited to review transcriptions of interview tapes for accuracy, as a safeguard.

This researcher found the interviewing of students, a former student, and teachers to be fascinating and rewarding work. Fortunately, the participants were articulate people, able to state and illustrate their thoughts and perceptions. The goal was for the

interviewees to feel free to be straightforward in their answers to questions, and for them to understand that their opinions and feelings were respected. The phenomenological design of the study resulted in the discovery of the thoughtful beliefs of all participants interviewed regarding gifted education.

### **Data Collection**

Permission was sought and granted from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university for conducting this specific study. Seeking IRB approval is a rather lengthy and painstaking process (See Appendix A for IRB approval email). Because human subjects will be involved in such work, the university is extremely careful about the protection of such participants. The authorization of school authorities (gatekeepers), parents, teachers, and the participants themselves, had to be secured as well.

Initially, the written permission of the Superintendent of the sites' school district was obtained. In order to receive this authorization, in addition to a letter detailing the research goals, this researcher submitted a copy of the research proposal with all appendices, including the protocols of questions to be asked of students and teachers during interviews. Upon receiving the permission of the superintendent, the principals of the two schools were contacted where it was hoped the investigation would be conducted. Appointments were set up with each of them to discuss exactly what the researcher wanted to accomplish at their schools, and to explain the criteria for the selection of proposed candidates for participation in the study.

The principal of the special school granted a meeting immediately. In his office, this researcher gave him a packet of materials including the research proposal; permission

of her university's IRB to conduct the study; informed consent forms to be used with students, teachers, and parents (See Appendix B); protocols for interviews with students and teachers (See Appendix C); and a suggested dialogue for the principal to use when first approaching possible participants for the work (See Appendix D). Within 24 hours a list was received from the principal containing the names of students and a teacher to whom the principal had spoken, and who had given their tentative agreement to participate. The researcher then sent emails to each prospective participant, explaining the project to them, and attached consent forms for students and their parents, as well as teachers. All agreed to participate, and further emails were then exchanged setting up specific times and places within their school for interviews.

Arrangements with the administration of the large high school proceeded as well. The principal sent permission for the study early on, and he explained that the details of the interview plans would be arranged with the head guidance counselor of the school. This researcher was able to schedule an appointment with him in due course, and at that time he was given the same packet of information as that submitted to the principal of the smaller school. Since the guidance counselor had a larger number of students and teachers to approach concerning the possibility of their participation in the study, and since he asked to arrange times for interviews himself, the whole process took a bit longer with this school. In this case, the various permission forms were left with the guidance counselor, at his request, and the wait was somewhat longer to have all the plans in place.

At the special school, Riverside, each of the two selected gifted successful students and one teacher were interviewed. This researcher went to the regular high

school, Oak Grove, to meet with two underachieving gifted students and two successful gifted achievers, as well as interviewing two teachers at that school. In addition, she traveled to another state in order to interview the adult graduate.

**Interviews.** Open-ended and in-depth interviews proceeded with each of the student participants, with three of their teachers, and with the graduated adult. The students met with the researcher for two one-hour interviews, the adult for two 45 minute sessions plus two 15 minute telephone interviews, and the teachers for one hour long interview. In every case, the appropriate signed permission forms were collected before the interview began. These interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the interviewee (with two exceptions, explained below), and transcribed by this researcher. In dealing with the graduated adult participant, she traveled to his home state for similar interviews. The two in-person interviews with the adult were taped and transcribed, but the two phone interviews were not taped. During and immediately after those phone conversations, extensive notes were taken both written and spoken on the digital recorder. Member checks with the adult occurred after the researcher had completed the transcripts of his interviews to be sure that he agreed that the work was accurate.

In producing the transcripts of all interviews herself, the researcher accomplished two positive goals: she could go over and over the words of the students, the adult, and the teachers, thereby becoming extremely familiar with the content of the interviews. After listening to a phrase or sentence that had been recorded, the investigator typed the exact words on the recorder into the transcript. The process of doing the transcriptions herself was extraordinarily time-consuming, but also created an extremely accurate account of what had been said.

In the interest of strict confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all notes taken and in the transcriptions of interviews as well. Only on one hard copy are the actual names of participants and schools along with their pseudonyms listed. This document, along with the transcriptions of interviews, is kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home.

A set of four guiding questions, provided in the Introduction to this proposal and earlier in Chapter Three, supplies the framework on which the interviews rested. These overarching questions came from the theoretical base of the study as well as from the research of the literature itself. Some of the interview questions were garnered from previous studies of perceptions of gifted learners (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Peterson et al., 2009; Taber, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, Quek, & Feng, 2007). Several of these specific questions were designed by this writer from her own experience in teaching gifted students; all were examined by two other teachers of gifted students. The guiding questions, as well as the questions in the protocol for the interviews were all approved by the IRB at Liberty University. The protocols can be found in Appendix C of this dissertation.

While it is true that the protocols for the interviews were approved in the research proposal and also by the IRB, upon occasion an interviewee would say something that opened a new path of exploration. One of the beauties of qualitative research is that new avenues can be pursued that couldn't have been foreseen when the investigation was in the planning stages. If a participant answered a question with a whole new thought, the qualitative researcher said something like, "Tell me more about that" in order to follow the idea presented by the subject. As stated by Ary et al. (2006):

In contrast [to quantitative research], while qualitative inquirers broadly specify aspects of a design before beginning a study, the design continues to *emerge* as the study unfolds, hence the name **emergent design**. . . . the qualitative inquirer is never quite sure just what will be learned in a particular setting because what can be learned . . . depends on the nature and types of interactions between the inquirer and the people . . . and those interactions are not fully predictable, and because important features in need of investigation cannot always be known until they are actually witnessed by the investigator. (p. 454)

Finally, all participants were invited to meet individually with the researcher in order to read the final transcript of his or her interview and ascertain that they found the transcripts to be accurate. These invitations for member checks (Ary et al., 2006) were accepted by some of the participants. Others stated that they were confident that the researcher's transcriptions were accurate, and they did not take advantage of the offer to read them.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher took field notes during and immediately after each interview, noting such details as the environment for the meeting, facial expressions and body language of the participant, and laughter or other reactions from both the interviewer and the subject.

### **Data Analysis**

After all interviews were transcribed, it was time to begin the analysis of the data. In their well-regarded book concerning the analysis of qualitative data, Miles and Huberman (1994) profess their belief that in order for qualitative research methods to



gain the respect they deserve, researchers must employ a more standardized set of strategies in analyzing their voluminous notes. These authors state that ". . . the creation, testing, and revision of simple, practical, and effective analysis methods remain the highest priority for qualitative researchers" (p. 3).

**Coding, evaluation, and interpretation.** Coding is a strategy that enables the researcher to organize and group data with similar characteristics into categories (Saldaña, 2009). For example, in this study, if several participants mentioned "boredom" in their interviews, those words or phrases were marked in a similar way, leading to the category called "boredom." After reading through the transcriptions and field notes several times, certain words and phrases were marked with the same colored highlighter or with colored flags. Using the same example, the word "boredom" or "boring," or phrases such as "it was so dull I couldn't pay attention" might all be highlighted in blue. Following Saldaña's (2009) explication of moving from coding units to categories, such phrases in transcripts as "she [the teacher] makes you want to pay attention. She makes it interesting" might originally be highlighted in another color, but during recoding, the researcher would realize that both "boredom" and "interesting" are aspects of an instructor's teaching style, so the two blocks of data would be recoded into a similarly colored category called "Effects of Teaching Style." As Saldaña points out, subcategories may be required to adequately paint the picture of the thrust of the participant's thoughts, such as specific strategies that a teacher used to make her lessons "interesting."

"Thus all the text and so on that is about the same thing or exemplifies the same thing is coded to the same name" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 38). As the groups of coding units and categories began to expand, this researcher discovered the importance of keeping a

master list of the colors and colored flags, designating which data, categories, and themes each color represented.

Finally, all of the categories were studied to see what themes were emerging. "We work with the data (words) to identify units of information that contribute to themes or patterns - the study's findings" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 98). In other words, the researcher organizes repeating ideas into larger groups that contain a similar theme (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). As pointed out in Ary et al. (2006), the order of analysis of the data is from *data pieces* to *categories* to *themes*.

After the data were sorted for theme, this researcher looked for meaning or constructs. "The next step is to organize your themes into more abstract groupings that we call theoretical constructs. . . . Theoretical constructs move the analysis from the description of subjective experience found in repeating ideas and themes to a more abstract and theoretical level" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 67). What themes answered the guiding questions of the research? Does the study reveal ideas about why some gifted students succeed in reaching their potential while others do not?

The constant comparative method of analysis was employed, contributing to "a process of continuous refinement" (Ary et al., 2006, p. 499). In this process, as the data is collected it is also analyzed, more data is collected, coded, and analyzed until the data collection is concluded. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) point out that with the constant comparative method, data collection, coding, and analyzing all take place at the same time, although the final overall data analysis occurs when the collection is complete.

Software was not used for analyzing qualitative data. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) write that some computer software can be helpful, although they also point out that learning to use the programs, especially for beginning researchers, can be a time-consuming hurdle. In addition, this researcher wanted to be in close touch with notes and tapes by reading transcriptions, and reading again so that the meaning could emerge from the words of participants.

**Statistical analysis procedure.** Since there were no quantitative elements to the study, no statistical analysis was necessary.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness, or credibility, speaks to the question, "Has the researcher accurately represented what the participants think, feel, and do?" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 77). In order to assure the highest level of credibility to this study, several strategies were employed. Triangulation of research methods was applied through the use of multiple in-depth interviews, field notes, and taped descriptive remarks by the researcher following each interview. During the first interview with each student, the researcher repeatedly paraphrased what she had heard the participants say in answer to a question, and then asked, "Do I have your meaning correctly?" During the second interview, the researcher went back over some of the more telling comments made by the participants in the first interview and asked again if she had written the meaning as the student intended. Participants were invited to read the transcripts of their interviews to assure their accuracy (member checks). In the follow-up interview with one of the teachers (member check), the researcher was able to clarify absolutely the teacher's

meaning with regard to two statements made in the original interview which had at first seemed contradictory.

A research journal was maintained from the beginning of the study, as suggested by Ary et al. (2006) in order to practice " . . . self-reflection to recognize one's own biases and to actively seek them out" (p. 507) In addition, a peer debriefer reviewed the work and offered suggestions pertaining to the clarity of data collection methods and analysis. The use of peer review also helped to ensure the dependability of the study, as did the research journal.

Though the qualitative researcher may never achieve the complete objectivity that is the goal of quantitative studies, certain methods may be employed to arrive at confirmability of the investigation. Reflexivity, or constant self-reflection on the part of the researcher that seeks to eliminate bias, is an effective tool toward this end. The research journal was a mechanism aiming to confirm the neutral stance of the researcher.

Transferability, or the opportunity for another researcher to apply the findings of this study to another, depends in part on the similarity of context between this study and others. In order to accommodate transferability for other investigators, this researcher used thick, rich description of both the words of the participants, their body language and reactions, and to the context in which the interviews took place.

### **Ethical Issues**

The protection of all participants in this study was of primary importance. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were of concern to the subjects; it was crucial that they be totally confident that their identity and their input for the study would be scrupulously

protected. Care was taken that as the researcher got to know the participants, she did not use any coercive measure, even though subtle, to influence them to slant their comments in the direction she might want or expect them to go.

The informed consent forms signed by all participants, and by the parents of teenage students, clearly stated the nature of the study, the voluntary aspect of their taking part, and their choice to not answer any question(s) asked by the researcher. It was also made clear that subjects could choose to leave the project at any time without any sort of recrimination. The participants were not compensated in any way for taking part in the study.

All of the information provided by the participants was, and still is, kept under lock and key, with no one privy to their names or the names of their schools except the researcher and the administrators at the schools who selected them. Once the interview transcripts were in hard copies, the original transcripts were moved from the researcher's computer to a dedicated flash drive which is also kept locked in a file drawer. The recorder holding the interviews is kept in the same secure location.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to find reasons helping to explain the fact that some gifted learners grasp the opportunities afforded them in their schooling and sail to the heights of which they are capable, while others, equally able, never become excited, or even really interested, in their academic experience. This second group of students, the gifted underachievers, are so numerous that the call for studies seeking answers to their lackluster performance resonates in the educational research community (Morisano & Shore, 2010). The amount of research, however, speaking to this crucial question, especially from the viewpoint of the students themselves, is relatively sparse (Coleman, Guo, & Dabbs, 2010; Delcourt et al., 2007; Hébert, 2001; Hoffman et al., 1985; Hoover-Schultz, 2005; Morisano & Shore, 2010; Reis, 1998; VanTassel-Baska, 2006). Through interviews with gifted students, both highly successful learners and those who are identified as underachievers, this researcher sought to find specific behaviors that teachers and other school personnel can adopt in order to motivate this cohort of students to achieve the academic excellence of which they are capable.

While this researcher recognizes the profound influence of parents on their gifted children's performance in school, and on their lives in general, this study specifically looked for motivating and/or debilitating behaviors of educators, from the viewpoint of the gifted learners. The researcher was searching for answers to the question, "What can be done at school to improve the performance of underachieving gifted learners?" Therefore, parental influence will not be discussed in this study, but it is a topic rife with possibilities for future research.

In this chapter, the writer will address the themes resulting from analysis of the data. As explained in Chapter Three, themes emerge as the researcher discovers certain ideas or perceptions that the participants in a study speak of over and over. "A theme is an implicit idea or topic that a group of repeating ideas have in common" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 62). Saldaña (2009) states that "a theme is an *outcome* of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection . . ." (p. 13). It is by studying the content of these themes that the researcher finds meaning in the words of the study participants.

In addition to the themes resulting from the research, the guiding questions for the study will be revisited in this chapter, as well as numerous questions from the protocols for both students and teachers.

This writer will use a narrative style to relate the findings of the study and to describe the ten participants. Six students identified as gifted, one grown man who was identified as profoundly gifted when in school, and three teachers of gifted learners were interviewed. Four of the students are highly successful in their academic careers, while two students and the graduated man are underachievers. The two learners identified as underachievers were not told they had been so designated, but the graduated adult is well aware of his own lack of interest in formal schooling. Because of the importance of confidentiality, the individual participants will not be portrayed, but their words will be reported as they said them and with faithful attention to the meaning they obviously wished to relate. In the interests of a smooth-flowing narrative, the ten participants will be given pseudonyms, as will the schools they attend or attended, and the cities in which they live.

Student Participants (All identified as gifted):

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	Year in school	M/F	SES	Race
*Arthur	Graduate	Male	Middle	White
^Betty	Junior	Female	Middle	White
^David	Senior	Male	L. Mid	African-American
*George	Junior	Male	Middle	White
*Liz	Senior	Female	Middle	African-American
^Monica	Senior	Female	Middle	Bi-racial
^Sarah	Senior	Female	Middle	White

\* Identified as underachiever  
^ High academic performance

Teacher Participants

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	Number of years teaching	M/F	Race
*Lucy	3	Female	White
^Penny	11	Female	White
^Carl	9	Male	White

\* Teaches only gifted students  
^ Teaches both gifted and regular students



### **Research Questions Guiding this Study:**

A. What degree of influence do the various elements in their learning environment have on gifted students' desire (or lack thereof) to achieve to the best of their ability in their academic careers?

B. What do gifted students perceive as the most and least helpful elements of their learning environment in developing self-confidence?

C. What do gifted students see as the most and least helpful elements in their learning environment in encouraging their desire to develop and excel in a future career?

D. What elements in their learning environment have teachers identified as the most and least effective in motivating gifted students to strive to be the best they can be?

### **Theme # 1: Importance of Ability Grouping (Speaks to Research Questions A, B, D)**

No theme emerged from this study more emphatically than that of ability grouping, and only one other theme - Importance of Teaching Style - was discussed with equal force. Students and teachers alike were vociferous in stating their ideas and perceptions with regard to the advantages or disadvantages of student placement in classes that were either heterogeneous (many ability levels included) or homogeneous (ability level of class members fairly equal).

The theme of the Importance of Ability Grouping was also the only issue that all participants agreed on in almost every respect. All students and teachers stated their belief that placing gifted students in homogeneous classrooms with peers of similar

ability was a primary strategy for assuring that these learners of high ability would be challenged with the academic rigor necessary for reaching their full potential.

**Students.** Four of the student participants commented that learners in homogeneous advanced classes want to succeed academically, and that this fact is a motivating influence on other members of the class. One successful gifted student (Betty) said, referring to her thoughts when moving to a new school during the elementary grades, " 'Wow! These people are so smart. I want to be just like them.' And they put me in an advanced class and I was ready to go!" The perception of all seven of the student participants was that members of a class grouped for their high ability level push each other to succeed. Sarah commented, "I was placed in advanced classes probably in third grade, and the people I've been in classes with I've known for a long time. We're really competitive so my environment kind of pushes me to be successful."

Two of the gifted underachieving participants agreed with the opinion that being in classes with high ability peers could be an influence toward succeeding, but they went further in their perceptions and said that the kind of excellence they saw in advanced classes occasionally made them question their own ability. They both confessed this lack of self-confidence with a little laugh, as if to say this feeling was silly, but it was obvious from facial expressions and body language that the perception was far from "silly" for them.

Betty spoke to this same theme when answering the question, "Do you or have you ever felt 'different' from your classmates [because of being gifted]? Why or why not?" Betty replied that the feeling of being different was prevalent in middle school

where "people looked at you like 'bookworm' or 'nerd.'" She continued, saying that when she got to high school her classes were advanced and she competed with the top 30% of her class, "we are all trying to compete and be the best we can." She no longer felt "different."

Though identified as an underachiever, George also felt the positive influence of being surrounded by students who are interested in learning and who want to do well. He said that being in advanced classes with bright students gave him a spark of interest he felt rarely in his "regular" classes [heterogeneous classes of mixed ability]. George related the story of one of the outstanding students in his math class who formed a study group which George was happy to join. "We'll work on homework together so we can get a better understanding of it. And then after school I'll meet them in school and do my homework instead of leaving." He went on to explain that being with other kids and working together not only helps his understanding, but makes the whole activity of doing homework much more enjoyable. "I'm really not one of those who likes to go home and work on my own," he said, with a smile.

To the question, "What difference did you see in the one year you were grouped with gifted kids?" Arthur, the underachieving graduated student, answered, "Mainly, it was a less hostile environment. I was not resented because the other kids could do well, too."

Monica spoke to the question of ability grouping with the same vigor as the other participants. When speaking about the difference between homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping, she talked about the experience of being in a class with students

of high ability, a gifted class. "We're all a smart group and we think alike. In those mixed classes we tend to group with the people like us, and the others are left to group and they often don't know what they're talking about."

In addition to finding inspiration in sharing classes with bright students who were competitive and wished to succeed in their academic careers, several participants commented that learning was easier when they were grouped in high ability classes. George, an underachiever, said, " I think I've been grouped [mostly] with bright kids. I seem to learn more when I'm around them."

Several participants spoke to the negative side of being grouped in heterogeneous classes. Liz said that she often felt in mixed-ability classes as if she were the "only smart one in the class, so it was like I was going to try to be like everybody else. I thought, 'I'm just going to cut back on what I do and just fit in with all the other people.' "

In the same vein, Sarah remarked that while in her homogeneous gifted classes, respect was shown from students to the teacher, and from teacher to students. "In the AP classes I feel like the teacher and the students are on the same level almost. And they respect each other. But in the other classes [mixed-ability "regular" classes] you don't get that. Sometimes the teacher treats them like a child because they're acting like a child." She continued, saying that when once placed in a lower level math class, after a few days she thought, "Okay, something's not right." She found that she couldn't focus because "People were talking. We weren't getting things done. . . . I could see a difference in how I learn and how the others learn."

Sarah then explained the difference between ability grouped classes and inclusive classrooms:

I definitely think it's better to be in a class with peers like you because it makes you want to learn and you become self-confident. 'Cause if you can be in class with these people who are just as smart as you are, it kind of gives you a boost. It's a great learning environment. (Sarah)

Behavior issues were another topic brought forward by participants in their discussion of ability grouping. When asked if she found anything in school discouraging to her desire to learn and succeed, Liz said that a "certain type of kids" were debilitating to her attempts to learn. "Like the way they act in the hall or the way they act in class." The interviewer asked if she meant rude behavior, and Liz's response was, "Yes, like bad-mouthing the teacher [in heterogeneous classes]. It just throws my whole way of learning off ; I can't concentrate when they act like that."

Sarah echoed these perceptions. Speaking of a class of students with wide-ranging abilities, she said, "Sometimes they're talking while the teacher's giving a lesson or they're . . . I can't learn. I have to have, not complete silence, but a quiet environment so I can pay attention to the teacher. And that's how I learn."

David added that he does better in a class that is ability grouped rather than in a heterogeneous group. " 'Cause in a mixed class some of them [the students] don't care. So like I said before, [they can disrupt the class], and that's not my way."

The researcher said, "So if you're in a class with other kids who have talents like you do, then you feel like they're more interested in learning, and you can learn together?"

David: "That's exactly right."

The attitudes of peers in heterogeneous classes could influence her motivation as well, Monica said. "If they [other students in mixed ability classes] blame everybody else if they're not doing well, or they say the teacher's not teaching the material right, or they're being made to work too hard . . . . If I were around people like that my entire year, I would probably also start thinking like that and my grades would not be as good. And I would start blaming the teachers for everything. "

If one of the two major themes to emerge from this study was that of the Importance of Ability Grouping, within that theme the word that trumpeted to the forefront continually was *boredom*. The overall message from the participants in this study was that often in regular (heterogeneous, mixed-ability) classes they were bored.

Speaking of the one regular class that she takes, Sarah said, "There's definitely a wide range of abilities in that class, and I would say I get bored in that class. Some of the kids in that class keep saying, 'Man, this is so hard,' but I can do fine. Sometimes I just go crazy when the teacher tells the same thing over and over." Sarah went on to describe her perception of that class as being something "not quite right." She realized later that the difference between that environment and her advanced classes was that the rote memory work and repetitive teaching simply were, in her opinion, boring.

George, an underachiever, spoke of another regular class wherein the teacher simply put notes on the board to be copied with very little discussion of the material. George's reaction was that he found that class boring, and that he was so bored that he didn't care much about learning or about doing the homework connected with that class. More will be said on this topic further into this dissertation when the subject of teaching style is addressed.

Boredom was on the mind of Betty as well when she spoke of what she discerns as "busy work" in one of her regular classes. "Work sheets almost every day, then a quiz on the stuff on the worksheets: boring, boring, boring," she said, rolling her eyes. However, Betty also pointed out one thing that she sees as a positive in her regular classes: she feels glad to be sharing time with friends who are not among the students identified as gifted and talented, and who therefore are not in her advanced courses. "I don't want to lose my friends who aren't in the AP and Honors classes I take," she said.

Arthur stated that he was bored with school from the beginning. "I have disliked school from the first grade," he said. "Obviously, the teacher designed the curriculum for the average student in the class. The smarter students were bored out of their minds."

Though perhaps not explicitly stated, each student in the study alluded to this idea of boredom in regular classes. Some even twisted their hands or screwed up their faces when speaking of the uncomfortable feeling of "what, more of the same-old-same-old?"

Perhaps Sarah summed up best the feelings and perceptions of these gifted participants when she said, in speaking of homogeneous, high ability classes, "I definitely think it's better to be in a class with peers like you because it makes you want to learn and

you become self-confident. It's such a great learning environment. I think everyone should take at least one AP class or all advanced classes because you learn more. And that works out to my advantage and to everyone else's 'cause we help each other a lot."

**Teachers.** The teacher participants in the study were just as decided in their opinions on the topic of ability grouping as were the student participants. All three teachers clearly stated their belief that placing gifted students in homogeneous settings with peers of like ability was extremely effective in motivating these students to achieve the academic performance which their talents make possible.

A major point brought out by the teachers was that when highly able students are grouped together in a class, they can and will motivate and help each other to learn. Carl said, "I like having my AP students in one class and my regular students in another because they can interact together; they can help each other grow, not necessarily somebody slowing them down at all." He paused and thought for a moment, then said, "I think gifted classes should pretty much be on the same level. They're probably going to get challenged more overall, and they're going to engage in more stimulating conversations consistently."

Addressing this same topic, Lucy told of frequent phone calls she and other teachers receive from parents of gifted learners. "We [teachers in gifted homogeneous classes] get this from parents all the time: 'My son [or daughter] is so excited because they're surrounded by people that are like them.' " Lucy went on to say that it was wonderful to see how students who were placed in ability-grouped classes for the first time were blossoming and forming close relationships. "And I think the reason it's so



easy for them to do that," she went on, "is that finally they feel like they're in an environment that they enjoy. And that's really powerful for them."

When asked by the researcher whether it is more advantageous for gifted kids to be grouped together or to be placed in inclusive classes [many ability levels], Penny was firm in her reply. She said, leaning forward toward the interviewer, "To be completely honest, I think that in this day and this time that's the only way kids who are gifted can excel higher [by being in homogeneous classes], and kids who are the lower-level learners can get the help that they need as well [by being grouped in homogeneous classes with peers of like ability]." As Penny continued to speak on this question, she became animated in her facial expressions and by using her hands to emphasize her points. She went on:

So if you group these kids together [gifted and regular students in inclusive classes], the lower-level kids will feel defeated, they'll feel like they can't comprehend it, whereas the higher-level kids will be so bored, if you take down a notch - it will be something that's very redundant and very boring for them. (Penny)

When presenting the details of why gifted students learn and perform better in ability-grouped classes, Lucy pointed out that learners of high ability are motivated by a level of curriculum that is appropriate for them, and are engaged by being surrounded by people who can think in the same way that they can. "They enjoy this intensity of learning. And I think that's really wonderful," she said.

Another point that Lucy brought out was that in inclusive classes, gifted students are often left to fend for themselves when the teacher's attention is directed elsewhere:

Another way to motivate a gifted learner is to provide opportunities and experiences to explore how much further they can push their envelope.

And we have to think about how much gifted students are restricted [in an inclusive class] because they're at the top of their classes and teachers aren't necessarily teaching to them, they're teaching to the level that needs [the most help]. When they're in a regular classroom the teacher doesn't have to worry about them [the gifted students], to worry they're not going to meet the SOLs maybe. And they [the gifted learners] need that stimulation. That's one of the biggest differences between gifted and normal kids - they [gifted students] don't often get the challenges they need in a regular classroom. You want to get them thinking more imaginatively and coming up with creative ideas. (Lucy)

The researcher asked, "So are you making the point here that in an inclusive class that the teacher doesn't have to worry about them [gifted learners] especially with regard to the SOLs?"

Lucy replied, "It's not that they shouldn't [be concerned about gifted kids] but that they just aren't. You know how many teachers are overworked, and if you have an inclusive class it's very challenging."

Carl offered two provisos with regard to his feeling that homogeneous grouping is the most effective system for gifted students. He stated that occasionally a gifted student

came along who was not motivated by the higher-level of learning and expectations in advanced classes. "So that's a big frustration when students aren't motivated, especially when they have the ability." Possible reasons for this lack of real interest on the part of an occasional high-ability learner will be addressed in the section of this dissertation on the importance of teaching style, as well as in Chapter Five. Carl also stated that when looking at the pros and cons of ability grouping versus inclusive classes he saw one academic advantage to mixing all abilities together in the classroom. ". . . you have the stronger students who can help the weaker ones in group work."

### **Theme #2: Importance of Teaching Style (Speaks to Research Questions A, B, D)**

When interviewing the student participants concerning events and influences in their academic experience that inspired them to dig in, become engaged in their education, and excel, no topic was stressed more than that of teaching style. Though all of the gifted student participants made it clear that being grouped with learners of similar ability was a priority, they also emphasized the crucial aspect of the manner in which teachers presented material. Even if they were placed in a homogeneous setting with high-ability students, the participants felt that equally important was the curriculum being offered to them, and the interest, or lack of it, that teachers elicited through their strategies in presentation.

**Students.** Spotlighting the importance of teaching style in encouraging learners to want to do their best, Monica said, "With teachers it makes a difference about what you want to do. Like that history class [a class she had mentioned earlier that she found quite boring] - I hated going to that class every single day. So teachers make a big

difference to me if they motivate you." Monica went on to describe an AP class wherein the teacher "just wasn't really into it. He was kind of a young guy and would do stuff that didn't seem relevant at all." She added, "You have to teach in a certain way where people will remember it. Like my government teacher does use PowerPoint, but she elaborates on it and connects it to current events today. She finds ways to help us remember it, and want to remember it."

In this same vein, Betty made the point that the heaviest influence on her desire to do good work comes from a good teacher. "And some teachers kind of make you *want* to do well so you have to keep up with what you're going to do. Some teachers make you feel like you don't want to be the one who doesn't do as well as others." When pressed to give details of just how teachers engender this wish to do well, Betty first shrugged her shoulders and said, "I'm not sure." After staring off into space for a moment, however, she nodded her head and said, "I think it's because they're enthusiastic. They really *like* what they're teaching." Another pause and another nod. "And they let you know they *expect* you to do well."

The interviewer said, "So the teachers that inspire you to work hard and do well have high expectations for their students, would you say?"

"Yes, definitely!" Betty said. This was said with a rueful smile, and both participant and researcher laughed.

When asked if the "high expectations" were made clear in her advanced classes, Betty explained that they were, and gave an example. "In math you have the whole

[syllabus] ahead of time so you know what you need to do to get it done. You can use your own time management."

Betty added to her perceptions of what makes a motivational teacher. "My teacher in science does do a bunch of different things. We don't just sit there and take notes every day. I know I've had teachers like that [who do the same repetitive things], but in science it's much more active."

Using similar language when illustrating his idea of an excellent motivational teacher, David said that in some of his classes in the past the teachers didn't seem to care if their students put forth real effort on their assignments. He said that when this was the case, he didn't care, either. When asked if he meant that a teacher expecting good performance from students helped in his desire to learn, David replied, "Yes, it definitely does. Every teacher I have this year expects the students to do something great, to go to college. And I want to be in that group - to do the best I can."

On this topic of teaching style, Arthur said that very few of his teachers throughout his academic career inspired him to want to engage in his education, other than to simply do enough to "get by." This "getting by," in his case, meant earning straight As with very little effort. He said that the reason he made even that much effort was to please his parents, and that his teachers were so boring that his real desire was to leave school.

However, Arthur explained that along the way he did have a couple of teachers whom he thought were interesting, and who made him want to learn the material and really put himself into the work. He said that both of these teachers provided "interesting

classes" with much interaction and student involvement in their own education. Referring to one of these instructors, Arthur said, "He was just very entertaining. He was very interested in the students and in what we were learning. I don't know - he made the class fun, that's all." He thought for a moment, then added, "So a teacher . . . if they themselves are motivated and interested, that helps in motivating and interesting the students."

David was quite explicit when discussing this question of techniques of teachers who inspire students to want to be successful. "They are like hands-on teachers, working *with* us. I like teachers who like while they're giving us the work they turn around and help us - help us individually."

The interviewer asked, "So you want them interacting with you, not just standing up in front of the room talking or maybe showing a PowerPoint?"

"That's right," David said, "and I like teachers who ask questions as they go along. That really keeps us thinking and makes us listen more."

Sarah echoed similar perceptions to those of other participants with regard to what specific strategies teachers employ to successfully motivate their students. "I guess it's just more what they do to help us learn. If they show PowerPoint they can't just read off the PowerPoint, they have to really explain it. Make it a real-life situation. In math, she did really well in explaining things step-by-step, elaborating. And she got us to participate in the class - we had some awesome discussions even about math!"

When speaking of an advanced class that seriously engaged her, Sarah said that the teacher was quite demanding. "She makes sure you've really read the assignments. Maybe a quiz on the homework from the night before, or you have to write a short

paragraph about it. She really knows how to make you think of things about what you've read that you would never think of."

Explaining her view of what is captured in a good teaching style, Liz was quite precise in her explanation:

I think if a teacher is just standing there reading off of a PowerPoint, and the students are taking notes, I don't find myself learning very well. It doesn't feel like a discussion to me. I feel like they're preaching to me almost. I have to interact to learn. If I'm not interacting with my teacher, I'll not be focused and I'll just kind of doodle on my paper. But when we're having class discussion and the teacher's teaching at the same time, I feel like I learn more. And I also think that when a teacher varies her teaching style, like do a hands-on activity one day and do a lecture another day, I think that really helps all the students in that class because everybody learns in different ways. (Liz)

Summing up his idea of effective, inspirational teaching, George said, "Well, they just make you think more. They ask questions. And they respect what the students say." George grimaced and added, "But most of them aren't like that. They just talk *at* you and all you want to do is stop listening and get away."

**Teachers.** The teacher participants in this study had ideas regarding what motivates gifted students to want to excel that were as explicit as those of the students. And they brought out several of the same factors as did the learners, with the addition of specific strategies they had seen work with their advanced classes.

Carl spoke about the high expectations he has for his homogeneous groups of gifted students, and the difference between those classes and his regular groups:

My AP kids, or my gifted kids, have a lot more responsibility and independence in their work [than do his regular students]. They read a lot more primary sources, they analyze a lot more, they tackle questions on their own, and I come to help them when I can. But they're more independent in their work. My regular classes are a lot more structured, and we're going to do this at this time, this at that time. I tell them basically . . . I'm trying to get them to think. I have to guide them along more. It's less work, less critical thinking, so in general, it's less independence, basically. (Carl)

The interviewer asked, "When you say it's less work teaching regular students, do you mean it's less work for them or less work for you, or less work altogether?"

"I'd probably say less work for both," Carl replied. "It's different types of work, though. When I do my AP classes, I put a lot of time into planning them, and then it's a little bit easier in the class in terms of them doing their own thing."

In response to a question concerning high expectations for gifted learners, Lucy said:

I think that some gifted students haven't really been challenged, that they have never been asked to achieve the heights of which they are capable. And they need stimulation. That's one of the biggest differences between



gifted and normal kids - they [the gifted learners] don't often get the challenges they need. (Lucy)

On this same topic of high expectations, Penny echoed the thoughts of both Carl and Lucy. She added a point that speaks to a reason that some gifted students don't work up to their potential. "I found in my experience with my AP kids if you lower your expectation, they lower their performance. If you keep the high expectations, they rise to the occasion."

When asked to expand this idea of teacher expectations being linked to student performance, Penny continued:

Well, with my kids, at least my AP kids, if I say, "Oh, take the weekend off - forget about English for a weekend - that kind of gives them the impression that this isn't as important as they thought it was. Or if you say, "Oh, it's okay, I'll drop this lowest quiz grade." Well, if you drop the lowest quiz grade, if you give them extra credit, it just really gives them the opportunity to slack as 11th graders tend to if you allow it. I think it's just their age, their energy level. But I've found if I say, "No, you need to do this," then they like "Oh, \_\_\_\_\_, I actually have to do it." And they will do it. They care about their grades, they care about their GPA, they care about where they're going to college. I think most importantly they care about what their teachers think about them. (Penny)

Using similar language, Carl also expressed the idea of students, both gifted and regular, caring about their teacher's opinion of them. "I think one of the main things I use,

not just for gifted but for any kid, would be relationship building because they want to know that you care about them. And a lot of kids, even if they don't care about the work, they care about the teacher."

Carl brought out the point that had been made by Monica when she said that to be effective a teacher must make the material seem relevant to today, must connect the lesson to a contemporary event (Monica, p. 81). Carl said, " I think it's also important, particularly in history, to try to make it relevant to them [gifted students in AP History class]. Even if we see it as relevant, they don't see it, and they don't think so. So I'll try to do things that make them connect to more recent stuff or current events."

Carl added an example of how he connects history to the present. "In the election year when Obama was running, I had them do a research project comparing Andrew Jackson and some different things with his administration and how it influenced elections, and comparing things with Obama."

When discussing specific strategies she uses with gifted students, Penny mentioned the fact that even though the students in AP English have high learning ability, she still must be sure that they understand what end product they are attempting to reach. Penny accomplishes this goal by a teaching a step-by-step procedure. For example:

So when we [Penny and another AP English teacher] work together, we think about, with our gifted kids, how we want to group it to get to the end product. So in the beginning, we really focus on different levels of style. Getting them to understand what diction, syntax, tone, and point of view are. And we can build on that and go into analysis, and can build on that

and move into synthesis, and build on that and move into argumentation. So, I really think about what they're grasping, what they're not grasping, how I present it a different way so that they *will* understand it so that we can move on to the next thing. In AP, everything builds off of one another. So if you don't understand diction and syntax, you can't understand tone and point of view. I mean if you don't understand that, you can't build an effective argument. (Penny)

When discussing the difference in strategies for teaching gifted versus regular students, Lucy commented that she believes that teaching is much the same with any learners. She said, "But I think that teachers of gifted children have many of the same considerations as teachers of any children."

Asked to develop her thoughts a bit more with regard to teaching gifted students, Lucy said that she wants to:

take them past their limit that they've established for themselves into another realm. I like to move them over to the left side. I like them to learn how to think outside of the box. Instead of taking the rote memory route, I like them to learn to create a memory that can attach to other things dynamic. They need stimulation. That's one of the biggest differences between gifted and normal kids; they [high ability students] don't often get the challenges they need in a regular classroom. You want to get them thinking more imaginatively and coming up with creative ideas. (Lucy)

A specific example of the difference in the way she teaches her high-ability students was Penny's description of assigning research papers. She explained that her AP classes do about three research projects per year.

But we're lucky if we can even get our average kids to understand the MLA format. And that's another difference. We've tried it a lot of different ways, and it just confounds them. They have a really hard time grasping how to do in-text citations, and how to cite things at the end of a work.  
(Penny)

Penny leaned back in her chair, looking more relaxed, and said, "And with the AP kids we can send them home with a book and they can do the MLA format on their own. So it's very different that way."

The interviewer asked Penny if, with her gifted learners, she assigned research topics or allowed them to choose their own.

The most recent research we've done would be on *Huck Finn*, and we'll assign them a time period, or a character, or an author. We'll also practice AP things like a synthesis question and they'll work on that. And then we do one [research paper] where they decide their own topic. (Penny)

A short discussion of the various topics generated by her students ensued, and the researcher asked if Penny's students enjoyed being more on their own, developing their own topics.

Yes, they definitely enjoy it. It's something we spend time on in class, we kind of talk about it, and they like hearing what other people are saying. And so that is very different whereas the average kids look at it like, "Oh, so much work." (Penny)

Penny was asked to sum up in answer to the question: "What can you do in your classroom to motivate these gifted kids, to make them want to get interested in their own education and to succeed? Especially the underachievers?"

I think the biggest thing for me is that I have to show excitement for them. For these high-level kids, I have to constantly be on my game as well. I have to constantly be energetic. I have to constantly go in there and say "You know what, you may not want to do this, but you can do it." One of the other AP teachers here said with the gifted classes like our AP students, you don't look at it in terms of a teacher-child relationship, it's more of a coach and team relationship, where it's a motivation when you get on them when they're doing something that is sub-par compared to what you want them to be doing. (Penny)

In order to be sure of clarity, the researcher said, "So in order to motivate these gifted kids, what I just heard you say is that you've got to let them know that you know they can do it, that you expect it, and that you will accept no less."

Penny nodded firmly, and softly hit the arms of her chair with her fists. "Right!"

**Theme #3: Importance of Effective Guidance Counselors (Speaks to Research Questions A, B, C)**

The literature is rife with statements concerning most school counselors' lack of training with regard to the unique characteristics, abilities, and concerns of the gifted student population (Cross & Burney, 2010; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Wachter Morris, 2010; Wood, 2010; Wood, Portman, Cigrand, & Colangelo, 2010). Further, and perhaps because of this dearth of training, "Sometimes counselors fail to recognize that blessings can become a curse for these individuals, and without essential guidance and support, gifted students are at risk to underachieve, overextend, and succumb to personal and societal pressures" ( Maxwell, 2007, p. 206).

However, this study focused on gifted learners' own perceptions concerning their guidance from school counselors with regard to their motivation to live up to their capabilities. The primary contributions from guidance counselors that student participants perceived were the counselors' assistance in the college application process, and their availability for personal conversations concerning various aspects of the students' lives. In the final chapter of this dissertation, the question of what further support counselors *might* be to the gifted cohorts in their schools, and implications for further research in this area will be addressed.

**Students.** David said that his counselor had been especially helpful in the area of all the preparations necessary in applying to college.

Last year when Mrs. Jones was my counselor, she used to bring me in and talk to me about my focus for college and getting me prepared for my

SATs, and doing what it takes to get to college. She mainly just got me to focus on the right things. (David)

Betty's experience was similar to David's. "The guidance counselor is really helpful. You can see her and talk and she knows how to help you make decisions about picking a college and a major - all of that."

Echoing the importance of help with the college application process, Monica said that her guidance counselor was "always very nice and helpful in answering any kind of question and making sure I'm always on track with my college application process. 'Have you done this, have you done that?' "

Sarah perceives herself as a self-driven person who wants to do well. She said that this drive to succeed "has a lot to do with the [school] environment and the guidance counselors pushing me to go to college. And they give extra time to help me with college applications and scholarship applications."

Thinking in terms of life beyond high school and college, George spoke about his counselor's attempts to interest him in college and in preparing for a future career. Though George was not motivated to achieve the lofty level in his academic career that his capabilities allowed, he did say that his counselor talked to him about various classes he might take to steer in the direction of possible careers that interest him. "She really helped me figure out what classes to take when I told her what I might want to do in the future."

Other than support in the process of college choice and applications, several student participants in this study emphasized the value they placed on their guidance

counselors being available to talk to about a variety of topics of importance to the students. "Mr. Nelson will really talk to you and you get to know him and he gets to know you," Monica said.

In reply to a question concerning the help that counselors give in sorting out difficulties encountered in their academic lives, Liz said, "Well, I guess you actually have to come to them with stuff." She went on to tell about the death of an old friend the year before. "Mrs. Jones was concerned and called me in and talked to me. She made me feel a lot better. So they have been a help." When the question about counselors helping in problems in their *academic* lives was repeated, Liz said that her counselor had been a help in talking about choosing colleges.

**Theme #4: Importance of Special School Programs (Speaks to Research Questions A, B, C)**

All student participants (100%) spoke of the importance of special school programs. In some cases the extracurricular activities gave them an incentive to perform well academically - this was especially true in sports. Other students said that special school programs helped them in other ways.

Basketball seemed to be the chief motivator in George's life for his desire to succeed. He explained that the school has rules concerning eligibility for playing sports, and he is scrupulous in being sure he measures up to these requirements.

In order to play basketball, you have to complete five courses and have adequate grades in all of them. So I would say, like, it makes me want to do better than just pass those classes. Like, I want to be the best of those



classes. And since I'm a basketball player, people look towards me to be a certain type of person. (George)

He went on to say that in his responsibility as a leader, through basketball, he must live up to high expectations, both from faculty and from other students who want to emulate him. When asked how he made the choice to go to college, who or what had helped him make that decision, George answered, "My mother and basketball."

Sarah was interested in musical theater and has ambitions in that direction. She stated that she loves to sing and dance, and she plans that the theater will be at least her minor in college. Soccer is also a major part of the school experience for Sarah. Since both of these extracurricular pursuits carry academic requirements in order to participate, Sarah arranged her life so that she could accomplish all that needed to be done in class and in outside activities, and excel at every undertaking.

It's hard but it's worth it. I keep thinking, "Okay, someday this is gonna pay off. Four years of soccer is gonna look good on college applications. Being up until midnight doing homework is gonna pay off." So that keeps me motivated. And I do love the stuff I'm doing - soccer and theater. So I just kind of push through it. It's hard, but you have to do it - that's the way I look at it. (Sarah)

Monica brought out the point that if a student is interested in extracurricular activities, then she must learn to organize her life so that she can fit in all the requirements of the classroom as well as those of the outside events. She said that being involved outside of classes almost forces her to become more organized, and that learning

to become more organized helps her succeed academically. "I do most of my homework at night [after sports practice or club meetings] - I do whichever one is the hardest first. I kind of organize with which are my hardest subjects, which are my easiest, which take more time, which take less time."

Betty is involved in a special medical assistant program in a local hospital, a program arranged by another high school in the city for students with interests in the medical field. Betty feels that this special program has helped her decide what career to follow in later life. She believes, too, that keeping up with the demands of the medical work forces her to organize her class assignments in order to not only turn them in on time, but to "do my best in every class."

David was enthusiastic in his telling of a field trip his guidance counselor arranged to a local engineering firm. "Mr. Putnam knew I was interested in engineering, so he signed me up for a trip another class took to Martin and McGee. I was able to see what engineers do there and I was even more motivated."

The possible connection between gifted students' engaging in extracurricular activities and their academic achievement will be explored further in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

#### **Theme # 5: Importance of Learning Study Skills (Speaks to Research Questions A, B)**

The clearest message that came from the gifted student participants with regard to this theme was that all but one (86%) had been offered no formal study skills training,

with the exception of SAT preparation sessions. Most students were not sure what was meant by "formal study skills" when asked the question pertaining to this topic.

Though Sarah declared, when asked, that study skills had much to do with her success in school, she also said that she had not had a formal course in these skills.

"Taking notes while reading is probably the thing that has helped me most. Some teachers have required us to do that and then it gets to be a habit. Making flash cards has helped me so much."

Sarah was the only participant to mention requirements from teachers to use any study skills. When asked about the importance of these skills on her achievement, Monica answered, "You mean like how I study? Yeah, I'm a very visual person so when it comes to trying to memorize things I have to highlight things and if I have to take a test I can get a visual picture in my head. I make flash cards for English vocab." When pressed to discuss *formal* study skills, such as close reading, how to read a text, or time management, learned in a class or workshop, Monica said she had not studied those things.

George was asked if he had ever studied formal study skills such as how to read a chapter in a book or how to take notes in class. He looked puzzled for a moment, then his answer was succinct: "No, ma'am." The researcher then asked how George went about studying for a test. "Well, no one can determine the way that *you* study. And like the way I study, I just have to look at it. And if I look at it, I just memorize it automatically." This comment was followed by a discussion of photographic memory.

Liz's answer to the question concerning study skills was, "I've never really taken any study skills like that."

David, too, did not comprehend the meaning of "formal study skills" when the subject was first broached. The researcher went on to a short explanation, saying that this skill included things such as time management and whether to read study questions in the text before or after reading the chapter. David said he had never had such a course, but that he always takes notes when reading the textbook. He said, "I analyze everything, and read a passage and reread it. So when I go to class the next day I will know the passage from beginning to end."

In answer to the same question, Arthur replied, "Study skills played no part in my academic achievement. I knew no study skills."

The exception to the rule of a paucity of formal study skills training was that all students except Arthur commented that they had attended sessions on how to prepare to take the SAT.

### **Theme # 6: Importance of Planning for the Future (Speaks to Research Questions A, B, C)**

The primary perception of gifted learners concerning their guidance and support when contemplating choices concerning their future careers was that little of this sort of direction was coming from their school environment. Most participants commented that their parents talked to them about future work decisions, but most also indicated that scant specific help in that area was forthcoming from teachers, guidance counselors, or other school staff. All participants but the graduated adult stated that they had received

help in choosing and applying to colleges, but the impetus for pursuing a specific career came from themselves. The one exception to this lack of help in planning for the future was that George's counselor spoke of his career interests once or twice.

Liz said, "I'm not sure what I want to do after college. Probably something in education or working with people. I think about it sometimes, especially now that I'm a senior. I guess I need to focus on one thing before I go to college."

The interviewer pursued this comment by asking, "How do you think you came to the decision to work in education, with people? Was there a person who influenced you in that choice?"

After staring up at the ceiling for a moment, as if thinking about the question, Betty, looking a little puzzled, said, "I don't really remember. I guess just my own personality. I've always wanted to work with people. I don't think I'd ever just want to sit with a computer all day."

When asked what person or event might have helped him decide about his future career plans, George said, "Well, I'm a basketball player, and that is like my inspiration." After a short discussion of basketball and George's experiences in the sport, the interviewer asked how that activity had influenced George concerning his future. He replied, "It inspires me to keep going. I could say it makes me think better."

The interview with George moved on to other topics. During the second, subsequent interview, the researcher returned to this question. She said, "We talked the other day a little bit about your career, and you're not sure yet what you want to do. But tell me again about what thoughts you have on the future."

"I really want to be a commentator, like on ESPN or something. I like to talk about sports. And like you're not only talking about sports, but you have to know everything about it."

"So is your idea that you'd like to end up being a commentator on basketball?" the interviewer asked.

"Yes. That would be my goal. Or even an agent - I would like to be a sports agent."

Monica had a definite answer when asked the question concerning influences or help in making career decisions:

I want to be a pediatrician when I grow up. I love dealing with little kids. I volunteered at a Y camp for three summers, non-paid. I went there every day - I went there by myself, and my parents were really proud that I could do it on my own, that I had the motivation. It was really nice being around the little kids and helping them learn what's right and what's wrong. (Monica)

Following a short discussion on pediatrics and the sub-specialties in which Monica was interested, the interviewer asked if she had any guidance on her future plans from anyone at her school. "No, I just really got motivated myself," she said.

While Liz did not have a solid idea for the field she might wish to enter after college, she did make it clear that her education was of utmost importance. "I think it's important to have a good education and have a good future and have a good job. I want to

see myself do good for me." She added that her "guidance counselors [are] pushing me to go to college." But when queried once more about any help in coming to decisions about possible careers, Liz frowned slightly and said, "No, I just want to do what I need to learn - I just like to learn - and get a good job."

On this same topic, Arthur repeated that he had no guidance counselor in the high school he attended, and therefore no help at school at finding a direction toward a field he might enter for a productive career. The interviewer asked if he had come up with any idea of a career path by the time he graduated. "I had a vague idea of wanting to be an engineer, but I had no idea what kind," he said.

#### **Theme #7: Importance of Self-confidence (Speaks to Research Questions A, B, C)**

Albert Bandura's social-cognitive theory contains as a core element his belief that students' self-efficacy is closely tied to their academic performance (Bandura et al., 2001; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). In fact, these researchers found that learners' self-efficacy and goals set at the start of a semester were predictors of students' academic achievement.

Margolis and McCabe (2006) add, "If students believe they cannot succeed on specific tasks (low self-efficacy), they will superficially attempt them, give up quickly, or avoid or resist them" (p. 219). These researchers go on to describe sources of self-efficacy for learners, and to suggest strategies teachers can use to improve their students' self-confidence.

Much research has found that simply being required to meet the demands of the rigorous curricula appropriate for their abilities is conducive to the self-efficacy of many

gifted students (Caraisco, 2007; Delcourt, Cornell, & Goldberg, 2007; Evans, 2008; Mayer, 2008; Rinn & Cobane, 2009). It must be added, however, that a few studies have concluded that some students, especially girls and women, have lower levels of self-confidence when first approaching a demanding course in math and the sciences (Ziegler & Heller, 2000).

The principal message that came through during this study when students talked about developing their own self-confidence was that it derived for the most part from simply being enrolled in advanced classes such as Honors and AP. All of the high-performing student participants made the point that when first encountering classes they knew were those with high expectations and rigorous curricula, they felt some trepidation. But all agreed that after spending time in these classes and finding that they could indeed succeed, they began to have confidence in their own abilities.

Those students who were identified as underachievers, however, felt that somehow they could not keep up with the pace set by "the smartest kids in the class," (George) or that they had difficulty finding the time needed to succeed at the work required. One underachiever had become so disenchanted with school early on that his only goal was to do just enough to "get by and get out." (Arthur).

George spoke of his experience in moving to his present city and school:

I'm from San Diego, and I did enjoy it there because I knew everyone, and my friends were there. But when I moved to [this city] I didn't know anyone, and the school was tough, and the teaching was a lot different from what it was in San Diego. (George)



George shifted in his chair, looking off to his left with a wrinkled brow. "The grading system was different and then there were end-of-course tests; we didn't have those in California. It was just a whole new program for me to adjust to." George's demeanor as he shared those difficult past days with the interviewer illustrated that it had been a tough time for him.

George went on to say that he had become involved somewhat with people and activities in this new school when he moved three years ago, but that he still didn't feel as "at home" as he did in San Diego. He says he is beginning to feel somewhat motivated to try to make better grades because he is in classes with gifted students, and "they help to motivate you; they're doing well so you want to do well."

One event that George saw as extremely motivating occurred earlier in the year when he wasn't doing his work, was not studying, and was turning in assignments late. His teacher told him he should "just drop her class and take an easier class where they just let you get by. She said she didn't think I could change." George's eyes flashed as he spoke firmly: "I thought to myself, 'Let me prove this teacher wrong!'" George went on with a happy ending to this story when a few months later he took an important test and made an A. His teacher said, "Wow! I had no idea that you would have grown so much." George was highly motivated by that teacher's giving him a choice: either do the work or drop out. His self-confidence soared.

David also had an experience in a class that gave him self-confidence. He was asked to remember what his reaction was when given an assignment that seemed really

difficult. "First, I really tried to figure it out myself. I researched about it just to make sure I understood it more before I went to the teacher."

The interviewer commented that she heard David saying that he hadn't just given up - he had tried to do something. "So you had a really hard task and you worked very hard and then you did well," she said. "Was that a good feeling for you?"

David responded, "I gave myself a pat on the back. 'Cause I accomplished something that I thought I couldn't accomplish. And then I knew I could do it!" David smiled.

Monica's confidence in herself shone through in several ways. When speaking of being in a regular math or science class, she said, ". . . there were some people who just didn't understand math and science, whereas I think I do." And when referring to her advanced classes: "In my AP classes you have so many smart people. We're all the same: we're all competitive, we all want the same things. We're all smart in different areas, we're all pretty intelligent." Asked to say specifically what she believed had engendered this self-efficacy, she replied, "Well, I just had to do it [the work in advanced classes], and I saw I could, so I did."

The confidence that has grown in Monica spreads beyond her high school years. She is going to apply to three highly selective colleges, and she seems to have little doubt that she will be accepted. She commented earlier about the help she has received from her teachers and guidance counselor in choosing the schools and writing applications, but she obviously believes that she herself has made a record that will impress the universities in which she is interested:

I try to do outside activities because colleges like to see that as well as your academics. And then I made sure I'd stick with these things for at least two to four years; I know colleges don't like to see you start something and then drop out. I make sure I take the right classes so when I go to college I'll have enough AP courses, I'll be in the top ten, and my GPA is high enough. (Monica)

Sarah, a high academic achiever, summed up the general self-perceptions that the interviewer heard on the topic of confidence from this cohort: "I definitely think it's better to be in a class with peers like you [gifted] because it makes you want to learn and you become self-confident."

### **Themes Emerging From Interviews with Teachers**

#### **Theme # 8: Importance of Acceleration (Speaks to Research Question D)**

Acceleration used in the context of this dissertation refers to the opportunity provided gifted students to progress through the school curricula at a faster pace or at a younger age than is usual. The term, as used here, includes radical acceleration, wherein a student may skip one or more grades entirely (Colangelo et al., 2004; Hargrove, 2012). Since none of the student participants in this study had been accelerated, it was not possible to discuss any perceptions they had in this area. However, the teacher participants had some experience with students who had been accelerated, and these instructors had insights into the topic.

Carl's answer to the question about acceleration was somewhat hesitant. He felt that decisions concerning acceleration should be made on a student-by-student basis, and:

If you have a kid who's intellectually ready, but also socially and emotionally ready, then I don't see a problem with it. I think they have to demonstrate that, and I think it should be probably a collaborative decision with the administration, teachers, parents, and the student. But I think it definitely should be based on a case-by-case basis. And then it could be good for the kid. (Carl)

Carl paused for a moment, then added, "I had a student last year, actually, that was on grade level in my class and for some of his classes, but in some he was really accelerated, like in math classes when he was a freshman, he was with juniors." When asked how that student had gotten along, Carl replied that he had done well.

Lucy's perceptions about acceleration were somewhat similar to Carl's. "I think that kids should move ahead as fast as they can," she said, "but we have to be careful that we're not asking too much of them to be able to adjust socially if they're placed with classmates many years older than they."

Describing her opinion concerning acceleration that included moving gifted students through the grades at a rapid pace, Penny said:

I am in favor of that. I've seen kids who have done that and it's benefitted them. One of my best friends from high school graduated with a Ph.D. from MIT when he was 22 years old! And he and some of the kids I know here would have lowered their performance level if they had not had the opportunity to do that. So for those gifted kids, absolutely, I do believe in that. (Penny)

**Theme # 9: Importance of Teacher Training in Gifted Education (Speaks to Research Question D)**

Much research exists speaking to the relative lack of special courses in colleges and universities for gifted education (Berman et al., 2012; Boone, 2008; Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2010; Johnson et al., 2002; Loveless, 2009; VanTassel-Baska, 2009). The teacher participants in this study were asked about their perceptions with regard to the amount of gifted teacher training offered in the United States, both preservice and inservice. They were also queried concerning the advisability of offering a greater requirement for such courses, in the future.

Carl's opinions in discussing this topic were succinct. He began by stating that he had not had any courses in college in teaching the gifted, but that he had attended AP seminars and workshops since he started teaching. Asked about the need for schools of higher education to add such courses, Carl replied, "Oh, yeah. I mean I think you have courses for everything else, why not for gifted?"

Asked if she had ever taken a course geared specifically to recognizing and teaching gifted students, Lucy, who teaches only high ability learners, said that she had not. Her answer to the question concerning the advisability of more such courses, both preservice and inservice, was, "Yes, that would be helpful along with experience."

More vociferous than the other two teacher participants on the subject of teacher training for gifted education, Penny explained,

I have not taken specific classes, semester-long classes. I did attend a full week conference geared towards AP last summer, and that was very

beneficial. It was taught by a college professor at Chapel Hill and the other was a retired AP teacher, and it was fantastic. So they're the ones who kind of set the standard for what I believe should be taught in AP classes.

(Penny)

Following a short discussion of various workshops, seminars, and conferences, the interviewer asked if Penny's school offered any inservice programs for teaching the gifted. She replied, "The inservice work here is geared toward low-level learning."

The interviewer asked Penny if she believed that there should be more courses in gifted education included in college schools of education. She said:

Absolutely! Especially for those [preservice students] who are capable of doing that. Because I feel like a lot of teachers here would teach high level classes if they felt capable of doing so. And then we could encourage more kids to take the classes [advanced] who should be in the classes. I think it would be very beneficial. (Penny)

## **Summary**

This study found a group of reasons, from the perceptions of the students themselves, that some gifted learners become engaged in their educational experience and excel, while others, equally bright, do not. This chapter presented nine themes that emerged from analysis of the data collected, and these themes were connected to the overriding research questions that guided the study. Many quotations were used - the actual words of participants in their interviews - in the effort of the researcher to present the participants exactly as she saw and heard them.

The message that shone through the words of both student and teacher participants, was that if high ability learners are offered stimulating curricula by well-trained teachers, apropos for their outstanding abilities, the large majority of this cohort will succeed academically to a high degree. Their perceptions are apparent in their words speaking to the nine themes presented.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn, from the perceptions of the students themselves, why a large number of gifted students fail to achieve to their potential. Six gifted students, four identified as successful academically, and two identified as underachievers, were interviewed along with one adult who was identified as gifted when in school and also as an underachiever. In addition, three teachers of gifted students were participants in the study.

The research method used was the open-ended interview. While the original protocol with questions for students and teachers contained specific questions approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the investigation began (see Appendix C), the interviews with participants often produced new avenues of discussion. Perceptions emanating from all of the interviewees brought out parts of the puzzle concerning the reasons that some high ability learners do not perform to the level of which they are capable.

After transcribing all of the interviews, and analyzing the data thus obtained, the researcher discovered seven distinct themes encompassing all of the perceptions and ideas of the participants. This chapter will present each of the seven findings with the researcher's interpretation of the data included. Limitations of the study will be addressed, as well as implications of the investigation and recommendations for further research. Furthermore, the findings of the study will be correlated with the theoretical framework.



## **Discussion of the Findings**

The preeminent issues that emerged from the data collected in this study were the questions of ability grouping, rigor of curricula, and effective teaching style. In the literature speaking to gifted education, these three themes are often addressed, but with no consensus among educators regarding the influence of each, nor in fact, what components must be present to ensure the efficacy of each. However, in this study, all of the participants were unanimous in their perceptions concerning the effect on gifted students of each of the three.

### **Finding #1: importance of ability grouping.**

The first finding that emerged is that 100% of gifted student participants indicated their belief that ability grouping, or being placed in homogeneous classes with gifted peers, is a vital ingredient in their motivation to succeed academically. All students in the study said that, conversely, when they were placed in inclusive classrooms with fellow students of varying abilities, their interest in learning was diminished. Teachers were also unanimous in their opinion that ability grouping is a major impetus for the success of highly able students.

This finding correlates to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), in that students reported that being placed in classrooms with peers of high ability engendered in them the wish to emulate those students and "be like them" (Betty, p. 72). Bandura says that learners will observe others and their environment, combine these observations with their own cognition, then arrive at their outlook and behavior.

A second correlation of this finding is with Bandura's belief that self-efficacy is the foundation for people's thoughts, feelings, and motivation for accomplishing goals. In the more rigorous ability grouped class for students of high ability, two of the underachieving gifted learners reported that they were intimidated by their gifted peers, and felt a sense of inadequacy. This lack of confidence may have contributed to their underachievement.

The Sociocultural Theory (ST) of Vygotsky comes into play in this finding as well. ST states that learners are taught more effectively when they are placed in an environment of social interaction with peers of like ability. This is the context of an ability grouped gifted class.

A conclusion that can be reached from this finding is that gifted students' being surrounded by peers of like ability is crucial to the process of becoming engaged in and excited by their education.

Though 100% of student and teacher participants agreed that placing highly able students together in homogeneous classrooms is a basic requirement leading to effective motivation of this cohort, our educational system does not always agree that this type of grouping is essential to the development of gifted learners. In fact, inclusion, the system wherein students with a wide variety of abilities are placed together in the same class, is the predominant arrangement in American schools today (Belland, Glazewski, & Ertmer, 2009; Voss & Bufkin, 2011), and is "considered the priority in the UK's educational system" (Ališauskas, Ališauskienė, Kairienė, & Jones, 2011, p. 103). Why? Research has shown repeatedly that ability grouping is highly efficacious in stimulating gifted students'

interest in their own education, and in being a great motivator in their desire to succeed academically (Adelson & Carpenter, 2011; Brulles et al., 2010; Burney, 2010; Colangelo et al., 2004; Delcourt et al., 2007; Dimitriadis, 2011; Duflo et al., 2009; Gross, 2006; 2011; Kettler, 2011; Linn-Cohen & Hertzog, 2007; McCoach et al., 2006; Miller, 2009; Neihart, 2007; Preckeld, Götz, & Frenzel, 2010; Reis & Morales-Taylor, 2010; Robinson, 2006; Rogers, 2002; Tieso, 2005; "Tracking Benefits High-Achieving Students," 2010; VanTassel-Baska, 2009).

Perhaps a reason for this reluctance on the part of many educators to accept the concept of the effectiveness of ability grouping for the gifted is the thought that this type of arrangement is elitist and/or undemocratic (Condron, 2008; Cooper, 2009; Montgomery, 2007). But if special programs, equipment, space, and specially trained teachers are provided for students talented in sports, music, art, and other areas, as well as for those very deserving students with disabilities, why not to the exceptional students of high intellectual ability?

A story illustrative of this prejudice against special programs for high ability learners is that of Mr. Palcuzzi and the PTA (Gallagher, 1976). Mr. Palcuzzi was the principal of a school in the United States who traumatized his PTA with his proposal to develop a program for gifted and talented students that would contain ability grouping, acceleration, and competition with other schools. He would hire a teacher trained specially to work with these students. When the PTA protested long and loud, saying that such a program would be elitist, undemocratic, and divisive, Mr. Palcuzzi quietly explained that such a program was already in place, and had been enthusiastically supported by the school for many years. It was called the varsity basketball team!

Commenting on the Palcuzzi story, Geake & Gross (2008) state that:

[the]story is effective because we *do* treat students who are intellectually or academically gifted quite differently from students with precocious sporting and athletic talent - or even talent in the performing arts; *school choir* or *band* can be substituted for *basketball team* with much the same effect. (p. 218)

Geake and Gross go on to ask, "What internal process prevents us from celebrating precocious intellect as enthusiastically and publicly as we highlight precocious athletic or musical talent?" (p. 218).

The experiences of the gifted student participants in the study reported here illustrate the difference between a school where high ability is celebrated and one where giftedness is not specifically nurtured. The students at the special school for the gifted were highly enthusiastic about their school experience, and were highly successful in their academic endeavors. Those learners enrolled at the regular high school, however, were exposed to the academic rigor and expectations appropriate for their abilities on a more incidental basis. Though half of them were indeed successful and praised their teachers and classes, the other half were floundering and not receiving the sort of support they needed. Other than AP courses, which the students themselves had to seek out, there was no gifted and talented (GT) program at the school. Interestingly, the less successful students described experiences in their athletic programs wherein coaches and teachers were extremely supportive, going out of their way to see that these students succeeded in athletics to the very highest level of which they were capable. And in fact, the

underachieving students stated that their belonging to an athletic program was the stimulus that not only made them feel that they were successful, but that it encouraged them to get high enough grades to remain on the team.

The experience of the graduated adult is, sadly, illustrative of the effects often observed on a student of profound giftedness who was educated in schools with no gifted program, no ability grouping, no Honors or AP courses, and which, in fact, showed no evidence of even recognizing that he had above-average ability in the classroom. (Arthur's father was a career military officer, and therefore the family moved often. The foregoing remarks, however, are descriptive of all the schools Arthur attended with the exception of his experience in grades one through three). Though Arthur's intellectual talents were largely ignored at his high school, his prowess at soccer was supported and strongly encouraged with special equipment, special space for the program, and a special teacher (coach) just for the relatively small number involved. And this athletic ability was showcased in public to the enthusiastic support of the school and the community.

To reiterate, the first finding that emerged from the interviews in this study was that *all* participants agreed that ability grouping is a basic *must* for gifted students to develop to the high achievement of which they are capable.

**Finding #2: importance of teaching style.**

The second finding was that 100% of gifted student participants stated that having a teacher who is able to make the curriculum interesting, who has high expectations for her students, and who knows her subject well is crucial to the academic success of this

cohort. Included also was the fact that the student participants all said that the curriculum designed for high ability learners must be challenging enough to engage them.

This finding, too, correlates to the SCT theory that observation (here the observation of the teacher and her methods), coupled with their own thinking processes, leads to learners' behavior and outlook.

Implicit in students' perceptions that teachers who have high expectations and who design challenging curriculum is the correlation with Vygotsky's ST theory as well. In these classrooms students are challenged to move just ahead of knowledge they already have, arriving at the next level of mastery of material: their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) formulated by Vygotsky.

A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that gifted students can be motivated to succeed by teachers who have been trained in effective ways to interest and motivate them, and who know how to do so with enthusiasm and a strong knowledge of their subject.

All of the student participants, and the graduated adult, agreed that a teacher who knows how to present material in a stimulating way, and who has high expectations for her students is essential. Of course, one might say that this is true of any teacher in any class. But the difference here is that it is unusual for a teacher of gifted students to have training in recognizing, teaching, and supporting this cohort. To find a teacher who has had this necessary training, either preservice or inservice, is the rare exception rather than the rule (Bain et al., 2007; Bangel et al., 2010; Colangelo et al., 2004; Curby et al., 2008; Dimitriadis, 2011; Geake & Gross, 2008; Gilson, 2009; Hargrove, 2010; Hertberg-Davis,

2009; Loveless, 2009; Matusevich et al., 2009; Miller, 2009; O'Connor & Hargett, 2009; Scot et al., 2009; Sisk, 2009; VanTassel-Baska, 2009).

Gifted students are unique and they have unique needs (Bianco, 2010; Cukierkorn, Karnes, Manning, Houston, & Besnoy, 2007; McGee & Hughes, 2011). It is imperative that schools of education in our colleges and universities not only offer future teachers the opportunity to take courses in educating the gifted, but that they require them to do so. Learning the particular characteristics of gifted children and learning how to interest this group in their school experience is essential. Over and over this researcher heard the word "boring" from the students interviewed for this study. Every one of the student participants spoke of the utter bleakness of sitting in classrooms hour after hour and day after day listening to their teachers reading notes written on the board or on a PowerPoint lecture. They also spoke of the boredom of worksheets and repetition of material they had already learned.

But, thankfully, these same students talked about the teachers who were enthusiastic, who expected themselves and their students to work hard, who designed courses with challenging curriculum that stimulated their students' desire to learn, and who had a deep knowledge of the subjects they were teaching. The underachiever participants made a point of saying that the teachers who inspired them also had an understanding of their somewhat low self-esteem when surrounded by highly able peers in classes such as AP, and who sought ways to encourage and support them individually.

Student participants also brought out the importance of teachers having high expectations for their students. Several learners mentioned that knowing their teachers

expected their best and knowing that those teachers believed their students were capable of mastering provocative curricula were major factors in their desire to accomplish much.

The teachers, too, said this was an important aspect of motivating their students. One teacher, Penny, said clearly that if she required top level work from her gifted learners, they would rise to the occasion and produce.

### **Finding #3: importance of support of guidance counselors.**

Third in the findings of the study was that all of the gifted student participants agreed that guidance counselors encouraged them in a variety of ways, but one area where support and guidance were lacking was in career planning. All of the student participants except Arthur (the graduated adult) emphasized the excellent guidance they received from their counselors with regard to applying to colleges, and preparing for the tests such as the SAT that colleges want to see. The students also were impressed that their counselors were willing to talk with them about personal matters. However, six of the seven students proclaimed that little in the way of direction for their future careers had been offered, and the one participant (George) with whom this subject had been broached said that future career plans were discussed in a general way without helping to zero in on a work life that might interest the student.

A conclusion to be drawn here is that for many gifted students, their future lives would be impacted positively if they had the help of guidance counselors in discovering a career of interest to them, and further help in planning a course of action working toward the goal of preparing for that career.



It has been found in the majority of studies addressing the subject of guidance counselors' effect on the school lives of the gifted, that the majority of counselors have little, if any, training in dealing with the unique characteristics of gifted children (Chapter 2, p. 49). Though some of the student participants related their desire to work in a specific field when they finished their education, several were obviously floundering in their attempts to have a career goal to work toward. These students could benefit from help from guidance counselors in zeroing in on careers of possible interest to them.

**Finding #4: importance of self confidence.**

The fourth finding of the study was that 100% of the academically successful gifted students and the adult graduate spoke of various aspects of their school experience that gave them confidence in their own abilities, and of the importance of these feelings. The two student underachievers, however, both reported that at times they had feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves to other gifted students in their advanced classes.

SCT's theories of the importance of observation of people and environment correlate here as well, and the correlation with the idea of the vital importance of the development of self-efficacy is illustrated clearly. Students repeatedly spoke to the positive effects of school experiences that increased self-confidence, while the underachieving students voiced their lack of this self-efficacy.

Over and over the gifted students who were high achieving said that they appreciated one or another aspects of their school experience because these ingredients gave them the feeling that they "could do it" - in other words, they gave them self-

confidence. Whether stated explicitly or implied, they believed that simply being in ability grouped classes gave them confidence because they could keep up with their peers of like ability. The fact that they could rise to the high expectations of teachers in courses such as AP also helped with this confidence.

However, the two participants who exhibited and spoke of less self-confidence were also the two student underachievers. These two were also the only subjects who talked about feeling that the teacher did not always make clear what she expected.

A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that although children may be highly able, they often need the kinds of support from teachers that engender feelings of self-confidence. Additionally, even though gifted, many of these students can benefit from instruction that proceeds from and builds on a clear, step-by-step plan. Penny, a teacher participant, spoke to this requirement for even the brightest students when she detailed her strategy in teaching the procedures necessary to grasp the elements required for writing effective argument (p. 90).

Several traits may exist among gifted underachievers, as in all less-than-successful students, that could explain why these highly able learners do not forge stellar academic careers. Included are immaturity, rebelliousness, procrastination, and hostility, among others. However, in the forefront of difficulties experienced by underachievers are low self-concept, and feelings of inferiority and helplessness (Oregon Department of Education, 2007), not to mention a low tolerance for what they see as "boring" instruction. Any and all of these characteristics could be addressed and alleviated by teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators who have been trained in the unique

needs of highly able students. The very intellectual abilities of this cohort can exacerbate such debilitating feelings, but too often, rather than getting the help they need, educators dismiss this neediness with the false assertion that "they can make it on their own." This problem is discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation, p. 48. These very bright young people need nurturing in ways appropriate to their unique characteristics. It seems that in many cases these potential stars are left to flicker and fade.

**Finding #5: importance of extra-curricular activities.**

Fifth in the findings was that all student participants stated that extra-curricular school programs were of paramount importance to them and to their desire to succeed at school, both in special school programs and academically.

Once again, the framework of SCT's theories of self-efficacy surface here. All students spoke of the confidence they acquired from various extra-curricular activities. The three underachieving students especially felt that these experiences gave them the feelings of value that they yearned for, and that these positive perceptions helped them to want to make more progress in the classroom as well.

It was somewhat surprising to this researcher to hear of the pronounced significance two of the participants (both underachievers) placed on their belonging to sports teams, saying that this activity was an important motivator to their desire to succeed not only in the athletic arena, but in the classroom as well. These underachieving gifted learners valued the sports team experience intensely, saying this is where they garner their feelings of accomplishment and where they develop self-confidence. This self-confidence seems to translate to more self-efficacy in the classroom.

Another reason that all of the participants found special school programs to be important in their strivings for success academically is that they are convinced that taking part in these activities will "look good" on their college applications and thereby help them to progress in their education.

A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that special school programs are effective in motivating gifted students to succeed in sports and the arts, and that this wish for success often translates into the classroom. It seems further that underachieving gifted learners with problems of self-efficacy reap powerful benefits from the individual attention and support given by coaches and teachers in the special programs.

**Finding #6: importance of study skills.**

The sixth finding was that not one of the gifted participants had ever been offered a course in study skills. In fact, none of the gifted students were sure of what the researcher meant when she asked about their experience with study skill training. To most of these students, "taking notes in class" was the beginning and end of their study skill knowledge, although two also mentioned making flashcards occasionally.

Though this lack of training in study skills does not seem to adversely affect those students who are succeeding in their academic careers at this point, one does wonder if their work would not be more easily accomplished if they were privy to some of the knowledge gained in a study skills course, and also if knowing some of such skills would not help them when moving on to the more demanding rigors of college.

All three of the underachieving students in this study stated that they not only had not been taught study skills, but that they did not know such a thing existed. Two of the

three were not earning grades commensurate with their tested aptitudes, and seemed to have no real system for organizing their work, managing their time, or accomplishing what needed to be done. The third underachieving student, the graduated man, made good grades while in high school and could have been considered "successful." However, this man was in the upper 1% intellectually of all people, so accomplishing As took little effort from him. He never learned good study habits, did not finish college, and today he is still a rather disorganized person with no methods of structure to fall back on.

A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that learning the benefits of study skills could be a vital help to gifted students, particularly to the underachievers.

**Finding #7: the effects of acceleration.**

Finding number seven came from interviews with the teacher participants. Since none of the students in the study had experienced acceleration, other than taking AP courses, they could not speak to the efficacy of moving through the curricula in shorter time or at a younger age than is normal. Arthur, the graduated adult, when asked if he would have been amenable to the idea of moving ahead through the grades more quickly, stated with enthusiasm, "I would have loved to try that!"

Finding number seven is correlated to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (ST). A major thrust of this theory is that learners must be presented with new material just above their level of knowledge and they must be coached in this material until they have mastered it and are ready to move on to the next level: their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The repeated use of words such as "boring" when describing their

feelings when grouped in an inclusive class point out that these bright students were not approaching their ZPD.

All of the teachers believed that acceleration could be highly beneficial to very gifted students, with one reservation. This qualification concerned the potential social adjustment problems younger students might encounter when moving ahead to join learners several years older than they. One teacher, however, who had known students accelerated with great success, spoke enthusiastically about the meritorious effects of such a strategy (Penny, Chapter Four, p. 108). She explained that she knew students at her school who could benefit from acceleration, but that her school did not offer such a possibility except in rare cases.

The conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that if chosen on an individual basis, the most gifted students could benefit from acceleration. In light of current research into the question of acceleration for highly able students, this study confirmed, from the viewpoint of teachers, that the education community might be well advised to consider this strategy more frequently.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study is that it had a relatively small number of participants. Although this number made it possible for the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews with each student, a larger selection of gifted learners may have been more productive. A second limitation could be that participants were drawn from only two schools, neither of which had programs of acceleration for highly gifted students. If a third school had been

found with a gifted program that included various levels of acceleration as a common choice, more could have been discovered about the pros and cons of that opportunity.

### **Recommendations for Educators of Gifted Students**

1. School districts should have in place written guidelines for identifying gifted students from the earliest grades through high school.

2. Gifted students should be grouped in homogeneous classes with peers of like ability.

3. Curricula designed for gifted classes should have the rigor and challenge that will interest and motivate this cohort of learners.

4. Teachers of the gifted should take courses that delineate the characteristics and proclivities of gifted students. These teachers should continue their professional advancement in gifted education through workshops, summer seminars, and inservice offered in their schools.

5. Guidance counselors who will work with gifted students should have courses teaching the characteristics and proclivities of this group. They should be prepared to assist these learners in not only succeeding in school, but in planning a future career.

6. Schools should have in place programs geared toward the encouragement and motivation of gifted students. These programs should include opportunities for enrichment, for students to be involved in their own education, and for acceleration.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

1. Studies with a larger pool of participants should be conducted in order to see if the findings of this study are consistent with those of similar investigations.

2. Further studies seeking the perceptions of gifted students themselves concerning their educational experience should be done.

3. Studies questioning the requirements of colleges and universities that future teachers in schools of education take courses in teaching the gifted should be conducted.

4. Comparisons of the effectiveness of teachers of the gifted who have had courses specifically designed for teaching the gifted as opposed to those who have not should be conducted.

5. Little research exists on the relationship between guidance counselors and the gifted. Studies concerning the possible salutary effect of counselors trained to work with and support this able cohort should be conducted.

6. Research addressing the support to gifted students through courses in study skills should be conducted.

7. Studies concerning the benefits and/or drawbacks of acceleration for gifted students should be conducted.

8. The influence of parents on their children's education is enormous. This is an area ripe for further research.

## **Final thoughts**



Through a long and deep examination of the literature concerning gifted students, and through her own experience, this researcher has come to feel a powerful empathy with America's most gifted young people. Indeed, she believes that these highly able students are those who frequently are the children "left behind." This group of learners whose talents enable them to learn, and to love to learn, are too often instead doomed to sitting in inclusive classrooms where the harried teacher is compelled to spend much of her time helping those "middle" students who might, with a little more instruction, do well on the end-of-course tests. Therefore, the room is often filled with repetitive teaching of a curriculum devoid of the sort of rigor and excitement that is meat and drink to intellectually able learners.

We in the education community must heed the words of researchers starting with *A Nation at Risk* in 1984, and proceeding to *A Nation Deceived* in 2004, and to a growing call since, to support and enhance the appropriate opportunities for the gifted young people who could and should become the leaders of our world. These opportunities should include not only curricula designed to challenge and excite our brightest learners, but also the chance to progress through that curricula at a pace appropriate for exceptionally able students.

A researcher in the forefront of gifted education said:

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. (Borland, 1989, p. 185)

To see any young person of great talent shuffling through a school system inadequate to his needs is dreadful. To see him or her never learning how to find and enjoy his own individual talents, developing them to his full potential, is tragic.

Most parents are not trained in knowing how to ensure the superior, life-enhancing opportunities for their children - they are not members of every profession. However, if a child breaks his arm, his parent wants to feel confident the orthopedic surgeon knows just how to heal that specific arm. If a child is a football prodigy, the parent can be sure that he will be scrutinized by the coaches, given all the equipment necessary, taught to play the position for which he is best suited, and instructed in how he can be the best that he, an individual player, can be.

Parents should also be able to rest assured that if their child, who happens to be an intellectual prodigy, attends an American school, that he, too, will benefit from professionals who have been trained to recognize, support, and nurture his talent. Anything else is a travesty and a waste. Gallagher (1985) said:

Failure to help the gifted child is a societal tragedy, the extent of which is difficult to measure, but which is surely great. How can we measure the sonata unwritten, the curative drug undiscovered, the absence of political insight? They are the difference between what we are and what we could be as a society. (p. 4)

Let us heed his words well.

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## APPENDIX A

### IRB Approval for Study

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#### **IRB Approval 1130.082411: Self-Perceptions of Gifted Underachievers A Phenomenological Study**

[RB, IRB]

You replied on 8/25/2011 9:04 AM.

**Sent:** Wednesday, August 24, 2011 3:42 PM

**To:** Behrend, Anne Hadley

**Cc:** IRB, IRB; Goodwin, Michelle Elaine; Garzon, Fernando

**Attachments:**  Annual Review Form.doc (31 KB) (Open as Web Page);  Change in Protocol.doc (29 KB) (Open as Web Page)

Good Afternoon Anne,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRE. Attached you'll find the forms for those cases.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project. We will be glad to send you a written memo from the Liberty IRB, as needed, upon request.

Sincerely,

**Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.**  
*IRB Chair, Associate Professor*

*Center for Gifted & Family Studies*

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The following template is intended to facilitate your development of an adequate informed consent form.

CONSENT FORM

---

[Insert Title of Study]

*(insert title of project)*

*(insert Principal Investigator's name)*

Liberty University

*(insert Academic Department)*

You are invited to be in a research study of [Insert general statement about study]. You were selected as a possible participant because [Explain how subject was identified]. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: [Name of PI, department (indicate University affiliation)]

**Background Information**

The purpose of this study is: [Explain research question and purpose in lay language]

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

[Explain tasks and procedures: subjects should be told about video or audio taping, assignment to study groups, length of time for participation, frequency of procedures, etc.]

### Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The study has several risks: First, [Risk]; Second, [Risk] (Risk must be explained, including the likelihood of the risk)

No study is without risk. If the risks are minimal, please say that the risks are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. Depending on the type of research you are conducting, you may become privy to information that triggers the mandatory reporting requirements for child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse or intent to harm self or others. In these types of research, this must be disclosed as a risk to participants. If there are significant psychological risks to participation, the subject should be told under what conditions the researcher will terminate the study.

**Injury or Illness** (Delete unless this project involves more than minimal risk.) Liberty University will not provide medical treatment or financial compensation if you are injured or become ill as a result of participating in this research project. This does not waive any of your legal rights nor release any claim you might have based on negligence.

The benefits to participation are: [Benefit(s)] (If no benefits, state that fact here.)

#### Compensation:

You will receive payment: [Include payment or reimbursement information here.] (Delete if not applicable. If applicable, Participant and Investigator must also fill out and sign the Participant Payment Disclosure Form. If subjects receive class points or some other token, include that information here. Explain when disbursement will occur and conditions of payment. For example, if monetary benefits will be prorated due to early withdraw.)



### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records.

(A statement describing procedures taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participant. Describe how and where data will be stored plus how the data will be disposed of and any anticipated use of the data in the future. In addition, describe how tapes (if used) will be maintained, explain who will have access, if they will be used for education purposes, and when they will be erased. Also discuss the limits of the confidentiality. For example, if focus groups are used, you cannot assure that other participants will maintain the subject's confidentiality and privacy. If subjects will be paid, the statement, "I understand that my name, social security number and address may be provided to the business office of Liberty University for the purpose of facilitating payment to me for participating in this study," should be included on this form.)

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the Liberty University [or with other cooperating institutions, insert names here]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### **Contacts and Questions:**

The researchers conducting this study are: [Name of researcher] and [Name of researcher]. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at [Location], [Phone number], [E-mail address]. *(If the researcher is a student, include advisor's name, telephone number and e-mail address here.)*

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of parent or guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*(If minors are involved)*

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT AND TEACHER INTERVIEWS

#### **Interview Questions for Students**

1. What do you see as the most encouraging influence in your whole life experience with regard to your academic success? In your school experience? Why?

2. What do you see as the most encouraging influence in your whole life experience with regard to your future plans for a meaningful career? In your school experience? Why?

3. How do you set goals?

4. How do you manage time?

5. In what ways does knowledge of study skills play a part in your academic achievement?

6. How do you balance academics, sports, extracurricular activities, social life, job?

7. Are you going to college? Have you chosen a college? How did you make that choice?

8. In what ways is the guidance counselor a help to you in academic or personal decisions?

9. Have you always enjoyed (or not enjoyed) school? For what reasons? How long have you felt this way?

10. What have been motivating or discouraging factors in your school life? How early did these influences begin to play a part?

11. How does teaching style matter in your motivation to succeed? Can it hinder your motivation? How?

12. Do you or have you ever felt "different" from your classmates? Why or why not?

13. Have you usually been grouped with other gifted students or mostly in heterogeneous classes? Did this make a difference? How?

14. Do you or have you ever felt the need to "hide your light?" Why?

15. How important is your education to you? Why?
16. Do you know what career you want to make for yourself? Why? How did you come to this decision?
17. What steps will you take to meet your goals for your future life plan?
18. Is there one single event or circumstance that inspired you to success more than others? How?
19. Is there one single event or circumstance that inhibited your desire for success more than others? How?
20. Is being gifted a gift? Why or why not?

### **Interview Questions for Teachers**

1. What do you enjoy about teaching gifted learners?
2. Is teaching gifted learners different from teaching "regular" students? If so, how?
3. What specific strategies do you use to teach the gifted as opposed to "regular" students?
4. How do you set up your classroom for teaching gifted learners? What atmosphere are you trying to create?
5. What kind of special materials do you use in teaching the gifted?
6. Do you assign your gifted students library work? What kind? How often?
7. How do you feel about ability grouping for the gifted in homogeneous classes? How about differentiation in inclusive classes? Which is the better method for this cohort? Why?
8. Do you believe in having very high expectations for gifted learners? How does your answer to this question benefit your gifted students?
9. What specific types of learning do you emphasize when planning your lessons? (Examples: critical thinking, creativity, students' involvement in their own education). Do you incorporate Bloom's taxonomy in planning units?

10. Do you believe that acceleration is generally beneficial to the gifted? How about radical acceleration?

11. Have you read the *2010 National Association for Gifted Children Pre-K-Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards*? Are they helpful? Why or why not?

12. Have you taken courses specifically geared toward teaching the gifted? In college? In inservice? Have they been helpful? Why or why not?

13. Should more courses in gifted education be offered at college-level and in inservice? Why?

14. What strategies and techniques have you found to be most effective in motivating gifted learners to aim high, to be the best they can be?

## APPENDIX D

### OUTLINE OF INITIATING DIALOGUE BETWEEN ADMINISTRATORS OF THE HIGH SCHOOLS AND POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

1. Mrs. Behrend is a doctoral candidate in Education at Liberty University. She is going to conduct a study with gifted students concerning their reactions to and opinions about their educational experience.
2. Would you consider being a participant in this study? You would be interviewed by Mrs. Behrend twice, each interview lasting approximately one hour.
3. Your responses to her questions and your comments would be kept completely confidential. No one other than Mrs. Behrend, your parents, and I will know your name or be told that you were a part of this study. Any report that Mrs. Behrend writes will not contain your real name, but rather a pseudonym.
4. If you agree to consider participating in this study, you will be given an Informed Consent Form to sign, as will your parents. Also, at your request, Mrs. Behrend will meet with you and/or your parents to answer any questions you may have concerning the study.
5. If at any time before or during the study you decide you do not want to participate, you may withdraw without any sort of penalty.
6. May I give Mrs. Behrend your name so that she may prepare the Informed Consent Forms for you and your parents?

APPENDIX E

GUIDELINES FOR IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION OF GIFTED STUDENTS  
IN THE CITY SCHOOLS IN WHICH SITES FOR THIS STUDY WERE FOUND

The City Schools Local Plan for the Education of the Gifted

2011 - 2014

(The following excerpts were chosen for their relevance to identification and selection of gifted students for the city's gifted programs. The excerpts have been edited to retain specific information with regard to identification and selection of gifted students).

*The City Schools,  
with its Tradition of Excellence,  
recognizes the uniqueness and worth  
of all students and will teach each student  
the concepts, knowledge, and skills necessary  
to be a thinking, productive, and responsible citizen.*

City Schools Mission Statement

## City Schools

### Part I: Vision/Mission, Philosophy, and Goal Statements

#### A. Division Vision/Mission Statement (previous page)

#### B. Division Statement of Philosophy for Education of the Gifted

The current mission statement of the City Schools encompasses gifted students when it states that the school division recognized the uniqueness and worth of all students. As an extension of that mission statement, the division's philosophy for the education of gifted students states that students identified as gifted should be provided special academic experiences to nurture their academic growth and development. This philosophy is derived from our definition of giftedness and our rationale for providing services to gifted students.

The City Schools Gifted Education Advisory Committee has adopted the definition of giftedness set forth in the *Regulations Governing Educational Services for Gifted Students* which defines gifted students as, "those students in public elementary, middle, and secondary school beginning with kindergarten through twelfth grade who demonstrate high levels of accomplishment or who show the potential for higher levels of accomplishment when compared to others of the same age, experience, or environment. Their aptitudes and potential for accomplishment are so outstanding that they require special programs to meet their educational needs."

#### C. Goals

##### 1. Identification:

By 2012 procedures will be in place so that each year one staff member from each of the 11 elementary schools will be trained in the identification and data collection procedures for early elementary students. The school's principal will identify this staff member as the chairman of the building-level gifted identification committee.

##### 2. Delivery of Services:

By 2012 each principal will submit a plan for the education of his or her school's gifted students to the director of gifted education.

### Part II: Current Status of Gifted Education



## B. Screening, Identification, Placement Procedures

### 1. Screening Procedures

Screening for gifted students begins in kindergarten and continues through grade twelve. Standardized test data, achievement data, gifted referral forms, gifted checklists, division-wide assessments, and other relevant information are reviewed each six weeks and students who demonstrate the need for additional services can be referred for gifted identification.

During the second semester, first grade students take the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test. Students whose scores seem indicative of a potential academic gift are referred for gifted identification. Upon approval from the parent/guardian, these students are tagged as potentially academically gifted.

Toward the middle of the school year second grade students take the Stanford-Binet 10 Achievement Test. Students whose scores seem indicative of a potential academic gift are referred for gifted identification.

During the spring, second grade students complete a portfolio assessment. This assessment includes a writing sample, an illustration, and a number of logical/analytic problems to be solved and explained in writing. These portfolios are reviewed by the classroom teacher and may result in a gifted identification referral. Any scoring of the portfolio assessments for program placement is done by a team of school psychologists.

### 2. Referral of Students

Referrals for gifted students are accepted for students in kindergarten through grade twelve. When a student is referred for gifted identification, the building-level gifted education committee chairman will send a letter to the home asking for permission to collect data on the student and to possibly include the student in the school's talent pool. Students who are placed in their school's talent pool are tagged with the Potentially Gifted Screening tag.

The Gifted Screening Data Collection form is collected and reviewed by the school's Gifted Eligibility Committee. The committee will determine if additional data is needed or what

services can be offered to meet the student's needs. A gifted eligibility meeting will occur within 90 days of the original referral. At that time it will be determined if the student is a gifted student.

### 3. Multiple Criteria Listing

The following criteria are used by the division to develop a profile for each student being considered for the gifted program.

1. Assessment of student products, performance, portfolio
2. Record of observation of in-class behaviors
3. Appropriate rating scales, checklists, questionnaires
4. Individual interviews
5. Individual or group aptitude tests
6. Individual or group achievement tests
7. Record of previous achievements (awards, honors, grades, etc.)
8. Additional valid and reliable measure that may be considered