

Fall 2016

# Creating Spaces of Imaginative Engagement for Gifted High School Honors and Advanced Placement English Students

Patty T. Bradshaw

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CREATING SPACES OF IMAGINATIVE ENGAGEMENT FOR GIFTED HIGH SCHOOL  
HONORS AND ADVANCED PLACEMENT ENGLISH STUDENTS

PATTY T. BRADSHAW

(Under the direction of Robert Lake)

ABSTRACT

Gifted students may have safety needs beyond the universal needs for security that all students have in order to learn. I investigated the needs of gifted students first hand through interviews with nine gifted students with diverse backgrounds. Interview questions and findings were organized around five major themes: characterization of self, characterization of classmates, characterization of teachers, characterization of classroom, and characterization of strategies and activities. Conclusions show that gifted students share commonalities in personality, needs, and characteristics as well as commonalities among the challenges they face, conditions in which they learn, and the environment in which they feel safe to learn. Features in classroom, teachers, and activities create conditions for excitement about learning and student engagement in learning. The most salient findings were the importance gifted students place on a learning community that includes learning through interaction and conversation as well as through classroom discussions, the need that gifted students place on being in gifted classes with their peers throughout the day, and the focus gifted students put on trusting a teacher to teach what is needed as the gifted students further pursue their educations.

INDEX WORDS: Gifted students, Gifted education, Creativity, Safe space, Learning environment, Academic discourse, English language arts, High school, Advanced Placement, Student engagement

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by

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Electronic Version Approved:  
December 2016

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge the insight and support offered by my major professor, Dr. Robert Lake. He is a wordsmith, a visionary, and a man who understands the heart of education.

My committee members and their contributions are deeply appreciated and valued. Each meeting was a goal-setting experience, and I always left thinking that I wanted to speak education as clearly, effortlessly, and passionately as they spoke it for me.

I acknowledge with great appreciation the support of my children. Dr. Laine Bradshaw set the path and straightened the signposts along my way. She was my initial inspiration and my refuge in times of stress. Mallory Bradshaw Goolsby, a school guidance counselor, shared her sweet insight and informed opinions. Her smile is always a light in my day. Brinkley Bradshaw is deep into leadership and is a successful Advanced Placement English Language and Advanced Placement English Literature teacher himself. Each book I read, I put aside for the time when we can talk about it together. I want to help move education in the right direction for them, as they have moved life in the right direction for me.

I want to thank my parents who always valued my education. They set the foundations.

I want to thank Camryn, Burt, Brinkley, and Maylor, the much adored grandchildren who give reason to what I do. I hope that each of you will love learning, will develop your talents, will care for others, and will allow your love for Jesus to guide you every day. Be blessed!

I just have to humanize and personally embrace and acknowledge the unconditional love of my sweet girl, Reese. She never left my side when I was sick, and she got up with me every night and slept beside me while I worked in the dark, quiet hours. I hope that she will be waiting for me again someday, and that when we see each other we will both feel that same relieved joy that we felt every day when I came home. I never thought of her as a person, but I will always think of her as my friend.

“Just move the ball forward,” has been the encouragement offered by my husband. He has pulled me through scary times with his faith, his prayers, his love, and his every day, dependable goodness. He has read with me, listened, encouraged, and protected my time. He is brilliant, and I love him. Thank you, Brink. If I could thank only one, I would owe all of my gratitude to you.

Curriculum Studies has changed my life in so many good and positive ways. What a pleasure it has been!

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Who are the Gifted?**

Who are the academically gifted? Even the most basic question creates uncertainty and even controversy when gifted students are involved. The nations can disagree. States write their own definitions. Parents insist their children are gifted whether they are or not. Students may insist they are not gifted when they are. Teachers who are not gifted are not sure giftedness truly exists. Teachers who are gifted either have matured enough to work within their giftedness, or they, too, may still stand in the shadows because the gifted spotlight can be so harsh.

#### **Defining Gifted in the United States**

Currently, in the United States, the idea of giftedness is tied strongly to the context of education, where the definition of giftedness necessarily precedes the identification of gifted students. Similarly, the identification of gifted students necessarily precedes the ability of educational systems to serve the needs of gifted students. In addition to defining giftedness, in an educational setting where students need to be identified in a dichotomous way—as gifted or not gifted—the further challenge is to *operationalize* the construct of giftedness. How will the construct of giftedness be measured and what criteria according to the measurement will be used to constitute giftedness?

As educators worked to refine the definition of giftedness, people who were excluded from the identified population began having feelings of resentment. These feelings of resentment from the general population still negatively impact identified gifted students. Lewis Terman's longitudinal studies of gifted children found them initially to be better students, psychologically and physically healthier, and socially more accomplished students who became successful men

and women (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). Terman's results are criticized for being biased towards the sample he studied. Specifically, the participants were chosen from an economically advantaged population through the process of teacher identification, and few minority students attended the participating schools (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). Terman's contributions, though significant to the field of gifted education, led to accusations that giftedness was a construct of elitists.

Those accusations of elitism have become allegations of racism by those who see the disparate numbers in the demographic population of the students who are tested, labelled, and served as gifted. Any student who is identified and taught as a gifted person in classes with advanced content, using strategies that promote critical thinking, and by teachers who are trained to understand the specific population and who are expected to have advanced content knowledge is a student who has educational advantages. This student is provided a pathway to academic success through the development of academic aptitude. If a majority of the students served are white, then gifted services will be seen as another program of white privilege. The challenge is to include all gifted students in gifted services. Teachers should broaden their perceptions and their understanding of gifted characteristics. The idea is to learn how giftedness manifests itself in all of its ways in all of the children who are gifted.

The other challenge facing gifted education is the idea that if the gifted are more, then other children, by default must be less. This concept is detrimental to every child. Every child has a right to the education that serves him or her best. No one should be suggesting, insinuating, or willing to support the idea that the education a non-gifted child should receive should be less geared to their success than what a gifted child should receive. A student should always be academically challenged and should always have an accomplished, caring teacher. Their needs,

their stories, and their humanity are of equal and high importance. The simple, honest truth is that the needs of the gifted are such that they cannot be met in the same way and probably not in the same classrooms as students who are not gifted. Equally important, though, is the simple, honest truth that each child's education should be of primary importance, and each one should be in his or her perfect learning situation.

Part of the operationalization of gifted is tied to the resources available to serve gifted students. Although ideally, each child should be offered the educational opportunities needed to reach his or her full academic potential, the school system is constrained by limited resources. The imperfection of the definitions and the resistance to spreading the acknowledgement of giftedness to minority students or those who do not behave with predicted eagerness, respect, and success in learning situations has created frustration and feelings of umbrage within gifted students who are not identified.

### **The Gifted as a Construct of Comparison**

When considering gifted students and whether a student needs resources and money beyond other students who are not gifted, a situation should be faced and acknowledged. In order to be gifted, a student has to score well above what is considered to be average. Who determines, defines, and accepts the parameters of what is average? An average student is as much a construct as a gifted student, or giftedness is as much a construct as average. As we work to unwrap giftedness and build understanding and insight for both the term and the people who carry it as a label, we look at indicators such as test scores, creativity, motivation, and academic achievement. Any and all of these indicators carry their own set of constructs that give to them points of measurability.

Arguably, those who create tests are those who create a pathway for labelling students. The phenomenon of the Bell Curve offers the explanation that what is typical falls within one standard deviation of the mean of a set of scores or observations, or within the central 68% of the distribution. In education, the group of students whose scores fall within this range about the arithmetic average are considered to be average. Teachers can generally reach these students with like instruction that is pitched at a single level that embraces those ability ranges. Those students who fall outside of one standard deviation of the mean—above or below—are those who are considered to have needs which require different instruction. The numbers support the idea that the students who score in the top 2.5% (two or more standard deviations above the mean) are statistically different from students who score at the arithmetic mean, while students within two standard deviations of the mean are not. When softening the constructed parameters of what is giftedness to sometimes embrace more students, somewhere between the top 2% and 10% of the student population, the gifted then include some students that statistics would not support as meaningfully different from the average student. Even when a somewhat mathematical definition for what is average exists, in comparison to that average, the idea of what is gifted cannot fit into the prescribed, expected boundaries. While the predictability of the results of the Bell Curve makes it seem actual, it is still an overlay of numbers used to operationalize ability.

Yet another construct becomes the issue when a gifted student is considered to be the ideal student. If the range of two standard deviations from the mean or the top 2.5% of all student scores on a given test indicated significant variation from the mean, that is at least a number that can be measured. How, though, can one describe ideal? If it can be described, how can it be measured? If it can be measured, is it really a measure of whether a student is or is not gifted? I

would argue that a gifted student may be far from the ideal student in any way except the potential for success. Whether the student uses that potential may determine whether or not he or she is ideal. That the student has the potential determines that he or she is gifted.

The next question arises. How is potential measured? How much potential has to be visible in a student before he or she is tapped for testing? How does potential look? Would it look the same in every school across the country, to every teacher, and to every parent? Obviously, it does not look the same to all teachers. If teachers could recognize potential as being more than high grades and good behavior, more students who are gifted and who do have potential could be served in schools as they need to be served.

### **Multifaceted Criteria**

In the early 1900's Leta Stetter Hollingworth posited that children with Stanford-Binet scores higher than 130 are gifted (Davis, et al., 2011). Researchers eventually acknowledged that an intelligence test score is not the only indicator of giftedness. The Georgia State Board of Education (2012) identifies students as gifted if they achieve passing scores on three out of four criteria: mental ability, academic achievement, creativity, and motivation. Inherent in accepting multiple criteria for giftedness is the belief that giftedness is multifaceted. Defining the exact nature of this multifaceted construct is difficult. Found in the Subcommittee on Education's Report to Congress entitled Education of the Gifted and Talented (Marland, 1972) is the original definition by the then United States Office of Education:

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 services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society.

The report lists six areas where children can demonstrate a capability of achieving high performance. These areas include general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability (Marland, 1972). The inclusion of different areas of giftedness broadens the student population eligible for gifted services in schools. In addition, this expanded definition communicates the idea that there is more than one way to be intelligent or to demonstrate intelligence. Additional reports were made in 1978, 1988, and 1993, with few changes.

In schools, the purpose of measuring intelligence is now tied to the idea of identifying those who either are gifted or identifying those who struggle intellectually to the point where they can receive designated help in a special education program. Georgia is one of the most supportive states of gifted students at the state education level, but even with the funding, thoughtful directives, and three out of four criteria format, students who may be gifted are not being identified because they may not match the stereotype of the ideal student.

This ideal student is supposedly one who cares about learning, has the ability to learn quickly, can be creative, and is usually respectful to teachers and the learning environment. If we are honest with ourselves and about the educational systems within which we work, we will add to the description that the student demonstrates white cultural norms, lacks the negative socio-cultural consequences of poverty, and has demonstrated the talent of being good at life, meaning that he or she is successful at least in some ways both in and outside of the classroom. As an example, the differentiator may be as simple as whether a student is wearing a clean shirt. Teachers and others may find it difficult to look beyond a dirty shirt or grimy jeans to see a mind that is dancing, categorizing, creating, perceiving, and reaching. Candidates still usually have to fit into the “great student” category to earn passing scores on three of the four criteria. They may

score well on tests created to measure intelligence, but they still may have to score well on two more criteria. Academic achievement is generally judged by grades on the report card, and gifted students often do not have good grades. Motivation is usually judged by an instrument completed by a teacher, and gifted students often do not appear to be motivated in some classrooms. If they are problematic for the teacher, which they may be, then the teacher may sincerely not view them as being motivated. Creativity is a characteristic of many gifted students, but the test generally used to measure creativity is awkward for even many gifted students. The test most often used has a complex grading rubric, and, some would argue, grading is generally more subjective than is ideal. Successfully negotiating through three of the four criteria is difficult for those gifted children who may tend to be academic non-conformists.

Included in the definition of giftedness given by the US Office of Education in 1972, are phrases that cannot be easily quantified. For example, determining the point at which abilities shift from above average and become outstanding is difficult, if not almost impossible. Deciding exactly when a student's performance can be defined as high performance in comparison to average or standard performance is equally challenging. The cut-off criteria may be guided by the implications for being identified as gifted or not. Specifically, gifted students require additional services beyond those normally offered to students. Because of the costs involved, students who miss passing a battery of tests by mere points are not allowed to experience the benefits of gifted services unless they can be included in classes where identified gifted students are receiving gifted services. These students who are not identified as gifted may feel the stigma of not scoring high enough on the tests. When subjectivity is involved in the scoring, students who could benefit from receiving gifted services may feel that they are being unfairly excluded.

Some definitions of giftedness are more conceptual. Pfeiffer (2013) acknowledges that a person can have a high IQ, that IQ is a factor in academic giftedness, and that IQ may be a predictor of academic success; however, like many researchers who acknowledge multiple facets of giftedness, he does not believe that IQ and giftedness are interchangeable. He also argues that a few points of difference on an arbitrary scale are not enough to say that one person is gifted and another is not. He views giftedness as a social construct that does not really exist and argues that culture is the determining factor of whether someone is considered to be gifted. If the tasks that a person performs exceptionally well are valued by their society, then he or she may be considered gifted (Pfeiffer, 2013).

The notion of giftedness is broader than it has ever been, acknowledging the idea that giftedness was narrowly defined as synonymous with intelligence. Reis and Renzulli (2009) believe conclusively that giftedness is developmental and that the gifted are not a homogeneous group with a single set of easily identifiable characteristics. They firmly admonish those involved in education to allow long-held and firmly entrenched beliefs about gifted children and adults and how they should be identified and taught to shift based on findings from new research and understanding gained through experience. The gifted are now described as coming from varied socio-economic groups and all ethnicities. They have diverse personality traits and views. Their abilities and aptitudes manifest themselves differently under the same and under varied conditions.

Who are the gifted? The answer would seem to require a simple definition, but little about being gifted or working with the gifted is simple. Gifted individuals are those thought to have more potential to succeed in one or more areas than most people. Bright and gifted individuals are not just a group of shining stars, holding a place in the firmaments because of



their brilliance. They can be the homeless as the dazzling violinist Nathaniel Anthony Ayers was so often homeless (Lopez, 2008), those marching in conformity as teachers are expected to march, those with lifestyles unaccepted by the majority, and yes, sometimes, those of power and privilege. They are often college professors, artists, musicians, writers, and those who contribute ideas and inventions (Kell, et al., 2013). They can be those who suffer from social rejection and who are sidelined, even in—especially in—classrooms where individuals who are intellectually gifted should be all-star players.

Gifted students comprise somewhere between six to ten percent of the total student population. Statistics concerning gifted students have not been available with any consistency. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2015), demographic data for gifted students are not collected in 17 states. Because data were incomplete, a series of surveys was sent to individual districts throughout the United States (Callahan, et al., 2014). Disparities in the data collected in these surveys is disturbing to those who warn that too many gifted students are not being identified because of race, gender, behavior, and stereotyping by educators. This data indicate the disproportions in the percent of the total population of the subgroups of African-American and of Hispanic students compared to the percentages in which these student populations are represented in the gifted student population. In these national surveys, only 50% of reporting districts had elementary and high schools that fell in the exact category (where the percentage of the subgroup to the total group is essentially the same as the percentage of the subgroup to the identified group) when comparing percentages of gifted students with percentages of minority students within a district population. In middle schools only 34% of districts reported to be in the exact category. The percentages for Hispanic students were slightly higher or the same. The largest disparity reported was with students of poverty. Only 17.8% of

the elementary, 21.4% of middle schools, and 15.1% of the high schools reported percentages that were not disparate. With the addition of this data, the problem of under-representation of minority and poor students in gifted programs becomes more apparent. Too many students who are gifted are unidentified. They are excluded from gifted services.

### **A Teacher of Gifted Students**

I was a classroom teacher for thirty-three years; for the latter twenty-three years, I taught high school English. In all of those years, I taught students who are gifted individuals. Some were identified, and others were not. Many high schools, including mine, serve gifted students in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. I earned my AP English Literature certification and then the AP English Language certification. I twice took a class that met ten hours, which in Georgia certifies AP teachers to teach gifted students. I then earned my gifted endorsement by taking a series of four classes that meet a total of fifty hours each. The classes, Characteristics of the Gifted; Methods and Materials for Gifted Students; Assessment of the Gifted; and Curriculum for Gifted Students, enabled me to place theory and research beside every day practice and experience. The results did not always mesh.

During my last two years in the classroom, I was asked to teach the four gifted endorsement classes to other teachers, and my learning continued. These highly qualified teachers shared with the cohort and with me their experiences with gifted students as well as their own experiences as gifted learners and teachers. These teachers taught in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. They taught subjects ranging through literature, math, music, science, social studies, art, special education, and Career, Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE). I have taught the full endorsement three times, and each cohort had a similarly diverse make-up with similar experiences shared. When I left the classroom three years ago, I accepted

a job with our regional education service agency (RESA). Among other responsibilities, I help to coordinate gifted services. I continue teaching the gifted endorsement courses and work with ten other teachers who are teaching endorsements in four different counties. This experience has contributed to what I have learned about gifted students, gifted teachers and gifted education. From the lens of this experience and expertise, I pursue research of gifted children as an avenue to both share what I have learned and to learn further.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of my research is to identify the key characteristics of an English language arts (ELA) classroom that make it a safe space for gifted students to share their views, ideas, and knowledge. In high schools, most gifted English students are served in honors classes for advanced students or in AP English Language or AP English Literature classrooms with a teacher who has AP English Language or AP English Literature endorsement. To receive gifted funding, the teacher is also gifted endorsed or in the case of the AP classes, has taken an additional ten hour class addressing characteristics of the gifted. The students who are interviewed will be enrolled in honors or AP English classes.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that will be addressed are the following:

1. What characteristics of an ELA classroom environment do gifted students perceive make it a safe place to learn?
  - a. What characteristics does an ELA teacher have that gifted students perceive as those which promote learning?
  - b. What ELA classroom activities, learning strategies, and pedagogy do gifted students perceive are those which provide situations where they can safely and fully learn?

## 2. How do gifted students view the needs of the gifted?

The following sections provide background and context for these questions.

### **English Classroom**

An English classroom that functions well is a miraculous entity that almost has a personality of its own that is drawn from the composite personalities, emotions, and actions of the students and teacher that populate it. My classroom had a personality that was high-energy, high-emotion, high-success, and highly verbal. My students engaged in academic conversation on any day they were not writing for the entire period. The discourse fueled the energy, emotion, success, and the ability to write steadily for fifty minutes (and then beg for more time tomorrow).

Early in my career in the last school where I spent twenty-one years, my principal asked me why the students couldn't write. My answer was simple as I responded, "They have nothing to say." They did not have opinions. The opinions that may have seemed to be theirs came from their parents or friends, and they could offer no support for these ideas. This dilemma was as true for the brightest students as it was for those who struggled academically. The first solution was to order a class set of newspapers, and the second was to order a weekly magazine meant for social studies classes. We read these sources. We talked about them, and then we wrote. The problem of poor writing continued, though. The writing was factual, but it lacked perception, emotion, impact, and intuitive understanding backed by evidence they found in the reading. The students knew facts, but they had little working knowledge of themselves. I began to strategically design and facilitate discourse to build knowledge of self and knowledge of others. For years I devised strategies that helped my students develop and defend their opinions. Their writing and their conversation greatly improved.

Through this deep academic conversation, I learned about my students. We arranged the classroom in a circle, and we all became important to each other. People who care about each other share with each other. Through this sharing of ideas and of life, I came to know and understand my students. Particular to this research, I learned about my gifted students. What I learned about them occurred in real time, in real words, with honest input and resulting conclusions on which I based the next day's lessons and goals for the rest of the year. Year after year, they taught me. Experience fueled my informal study of the gifted. I now want to supplement that learning with a formal research study of giftedness. I want to go beyond experience. I will use systematic inquiry, which should remove bias when I am the teacher, specificity that results from referencing only my classroom, and should increase the generalizability. I will still take my knowledge from the source: the gifted.

### **Giftedness from the Teacher Lens**

Gifted students can be difficult if their needs are not met. Usually, their needs include learning at a rapid pace; leading, even if they lead only themselves; time to complete a task that interests them; input concerning what and how they will learn; freedom from unreasonable expectations from self and others, and freedom from carrying others. Leading should never be confused with carrying. The only gifted students who should be asked to work with or tutor others are those who are passionate about teaching and/or helping others. A safe classroom for a gifted student is one where knowledge and questions are presented fast enough to maintain interest. Giftedness is, after all the struggles to define it, the ability to learn quickly at a great depth and with intense interest. If students can safely communicate their ideas through discourse, then learning maintains interest and direction. It becomes relevant to life; therefore, learning

becomes relevant to the passion for a subject that a gifted child has developed. If the passion has not yet been discovered, safe academic discourse offers pathways for that discovery.

In addition to needs that address their giftedness, gifted students have the same needs as other individuals (teenagers, in the case of high school). They need love and acceptance. They want someone to speak to them when they walk down the halls; they want someone to sit with at lunch. They need to make someone proud of them. They want to do well enough to keep their parents mostly happy. They want to fit in with the crowd sometimes, especially concerning their clothes and appearance. They want to be invited to the parties, after ballgame suppers, and Saturday night events. They want to be liked by at least a few people. They want to have enough money to eat, and, again in the case of high school students, buy gas for their cars or someone else's.

Bright and gifted individuals are just people, and they are found in every group. Perhaps this ability to exceed normal expectations is found in all people, and the identification processes for recognizing giftedness are too limited, faulty, or subjective. Whatever the truth of giftedness, people can suffer when they are forced to suppress or ignore their talents just as they often suffer when they are forced to suppress or ignore their beliefs. Those who are gifted are also, very often, those who are marginalized. They, just as others who are marginalized, deserve attention from those who profess to be thoughtfully inclusive, openly fair, steadfastly caring, respectful of individuality, and proponents of and participants in inspirational teaching.

The gifted are the other. They live in a world without balance. They are smarter than they are old. Socially, they are children; academically, they are years ahead of grade-level friends. Emotionally, they may be quite immature. Being smarter than a teacher, facing the jealousy of peers, not meeting the highest expectations of parents who do not understand giftedness, and

asking questions of oneself before realizing that some questions cannot be answered within the confines of life as we know it provide the constant turmoil under which many gifted children live on a full-time basis.

### **Gifted Students**

Even though I am no longer in the classroom, I will always be a teacher, and teachers think in terms of students. While many students I have taught become quiet in my mind, others continue to participate in my thinking through memories that revive themselves often.

Lilly is a gifted student who does not let me get far away from her. She hated me for the first 172 days the first year I taught her. She challenged me in every possible way she could think of to make me feel uncomfortable, without words, or angry. She introduced every controversial topic imaginable, and she had an impressive imagination. We argued about some topic almost every day, and I made a point of winning the arguments. She thought I hated her, and her mother almost withdrew her from my class. One day a week before the end of the year, she walked into the room and sat in my chair. I look at her and laughed. "I figured it out," she said. "Did you?" I asked. "You love me," she stated with absolute confidence, "and I love you." "Get out of my chair," I said. Instead of arguing with me every day, she began singing to me. She has been impressively successful in college. "When I'm scared, I just remember that Mrs. Bradshaw loves me." She loses no arguments.

Lucy is a gifted student who was almost raped by a relative when she was a little girl. A neighbor saved her by physically grabbing her and keeping her in his house until her mother could get home. Her life after that was a series of homes provided by one relative or another. She exploded into my classroom one day. I have seen few children so angry, so filled with self-blame, and facing what was close to self-hatred. She loved classroom zingers, too. I would just

zing back with a smile. I must have written to that child every day for six months. I told her she was worthy. I pointed out that she was brilliant. I told her that we loved her. She began to look around. She could see that she was accepted in this gifted classroom. People did like her. She began writing to me. I got a short note every day or so. She told me that she loved me. She told me that I was brilliant. She told me that the class liked me. She left all of her negative feelings in the middle, back desk when she moved to the front of the room. I have rarely had my desks in rows since that time. I never want a child to sit in the back in the middle again. Lucy may get her doctorate before I get mine.

Nikki nearly drove me to early retirement. She had a sassy walk, a sassy mouth, and a mind that rivaled any I had ever had to deal with. She didn't like to write, read, speak publicly, or come to school. She needed to work two jobs. All that she earned, she gave to her two little sisters and her little brother. I almost cried in relief when I discovered that she could draw. I bought colored pencils, colored pens, sketch pads, and every other art supply I could afford. I began bargaining. She accepted every deal I offered. Drawing was not only her talent; it was her passion. What was not part of the deal was that I would be given some of the artwork. She gave me beautiful drawings that I still have. She pulled her grades up to passing and then to acceptable. She took care of her siblings. She unexpectedly died several years after she graduated. All I could think about was how much she gave to others, what an incredible mind she had, how much talent died with her, and how much I had come to love her. Life is not always kind to a child, any child. The younger children she cared for, though, are healthy and successful because that junior in high school fed them, bought them clothes, paid for doctor visits, and paid for rent on an old, but okay trailer in a fairly safe section of town. She had more than one passion. Gifted children often give all they have to what they love.



These three students are just three of the gifted that I think about often. What the gifted class, their gifted classmates, and I hope their teacher came to mean to them made a difference in their success in life. Nikki did not live long, but she lived importantly. Many other gifted students are just as important to me. Most of them are living and are living happily. I have mourned those I lost. I celebrate the successes of others. They are meeting their impressive goals and collecting college degrees. They are building families and companies, stellar reputations and portfolios, homes and confidence. They are exercising their abilities to succeed, and they are using their emotional stability to work through those who may be envious, people who doubt the validity of their ideas, and the inability of some to keep pace with their creativity. They have found their ways to at least the appearance of happiness. How did they manage to act on their potential? What advice can students like them give to those who struggle? Listening to the individual stories of the gifted will help to break down the stereotypes they carry. They can be seen as distinct people and not just as a member of a group of people expected to always make high grades and reach perfection, to be uncool and dorky when working with their passions, to be culturally dominant, and to sometimes be socially inept because their interests take them out of mainstream peer activities.

### **Gifted Students and the Problems They Face**

Labeling the intellectual ability of a child can cause great distress for parents and for those children being tested. From the first moment when a child is identified as gifted and receives the test results from any one of a battery of intelligence tests indicating that giftedness, the child is isolated from his or her peers physically, socially, or both. Mentally, the child has probably felt different in many learning situations. These feelings of isolation and difference are difficult for students of all ages to handle. Students have to be identified to be served in gifted

learning environments with teachers who are trained to work with them. Being labelled sets them apart and makes them feel more different than they already feel. Not serving them academically creates a daunting list of problems. They become bored in school. They may stop working. They may become underachievers. They may be mismatched with the curriculum they are forced to study and join the “dropping out with dignity” (Reis, 1998) group who refuse with integrity to do work below their intellectual ability.

Traditionally, the idea that one is gifted seems to reek of the impression that one is privileged. The stereotypical gifted student is white, generally male, and well-behaved. The idea that an under-privileged African-American female or an African-American male who is one of many of his gender and culture to often be in trouble in the classroom can be foreign to the thinking of those in charge of education. My experiences, though, tell me that the student who is capable but is also willing to aggravate, may be the gifted student. I challenge, and in challenging, I often find the response I suspected was lurking. Eyes meet. Grins are exchanged, and the classroom has become a more interesting place for everyone in it. A gifted mind becomes engaged. In the classroom, I generally do not allow a gifted student to follow the stereotypical protocol. It is too often a facade behind which an intelligent brain runs circles around reality.

Now, another group of students also faces problems with gifted identification. With the influx into schools of children who do not speak English as their first language, educators cannot allow situations where a student is unfamiliar with English or is not a member of the dominant culture to be barriers to being perceived as gifted. Typically, groups that are under-represented in gifted programs are African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Native Americans students (Ford, 2007, p. 401). Sadly, even members of the slighted groups may not see themselves as

gifted because they do not fit the stereotypical criteria. Ferguson (2001) discusses the problems with inequality incurred when the entire population of a school takes the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills, but only those students recommended by teachers are allowed to take a test to see if they qualify for the gifted program. She questions what teachers perceive a gifted child looks like and sounds like when the “vast majority” (p. 60) of the students in the gifted program are white. In Georgia, recommendations are not offered only by teachers. Students, parents, or even a friend or relative can make a recommendation for gifted testing. While this availability to testing is admirable, it is problematic. The students and those who know them may not understand what being gifted really is. Students may not meet the perceived stereotypes, so those who know them do not see them as possibly being gifted. People other than educators do not understand how to make the recommendation. Teachers feel relieved of the responsibility of making a recommendation for testing because almost anyone can make the recommendation if he or she thinks a child is gifted. Whatever the reasons and excuses, a disparity exists between the numbers of identified gifted students who fit the stereotypes and the numbers of students in gifted programs who are not in the dominant culture. This difference indicates that many students who need gifted services are not receiving them. This situation is one that needs to be corrected so that all children can receive an equitable education.

An equitable education for the gifted may involve enabling them to learn more about the interests that occupy their focus. The gifted often develop passions that become the focus of their learning and their lives. They tend to want to know all there is to know about this topic. If life is rolling along for them as it should, the want to know becomes a driving need to know the further they progress into the subject or activity. Too many times, though, life intrudes. They cannot focus. Often, they are not allowed to focus. The pain of this deprivation is real. Not being

allowed to read, to experiment, or to question with the time to seek answers is as painful for a gifted child as not being able to learn is to a child who struggles academically. We have great sympathy for the child who struggles. We tend to ignore the child who excels. Each one though, carries the heavy load of being different. We live in a world where being just above average is highly prized and being bright is commended as being akin to perfection. Those who are below average garner federal dollars and teacher attention. Those who are brilliant tend to collect distrust, denial, and acrimony.

As much as I would like to believe it, not all gifted students love English. One student I remember, loved drama, but he despised English. I tried to build the obvious bridges between the two, but he was not interested in crossing to the English side from the wonder of drama. Every day, he entered my class, asking if he could go to the auditorium. Our drama teacher, a highly gifted individual who ran a stellar program, had given him a note to give to me that said he was always wanted in drama. Every day, I bargained. I would tell him to write one brilliant paragraph, or on some days, one brilliant sentence, and he could go to drama. Brilliance raced across the blank white spaces between the thin blue lines of his paper like a NASCAR sprint cup car bound for a championship finish. I knew he met and surpassed the standards. He knew I would not stand between him and the place, people, and subject he loved. He could be free to learn more about and to fully experience his passion; everyone won.

O'Connell-Ross (1993) describes the educational plight of gifted and talented students by explaining that many of them sit in classrooms where they are not challenged and are assigned work that requires effort far below their abilities. His comment that the "...belief espoused in school reform that children from all economic and cultural backgrounds must reach their full potential has not been extended to America's most talented students" (p. 5) is a clear indication

that he recognizes the gifted, talented, and bright students as a group that is marginalized. They are denied access to an equitable education that enables and empowers them to reach their full potentials. That they reach someone else's level of potential and ability or can live someone else's dream is not enough; they should be afforded the opportunities to reach and live their own.

### **Gifted Students, Power, and Oppression**

Mixing the knowledge of how others view them with their own inner insecurities often causes a disruption of self for gifted children. Holding power and fighting the powerful are two different problems. I have often cautioned my students when reading or participating in academic discourse to identify the source of power, the needs of those who have power, and how power is being enacted on the powerless. Helping gifted and talented students recognize the power they hold through their abilities to think as individuals, to hold and build on knowledge, and to learn rapidly is both challenging and rewarding. They need to recognize their own power and how to use it just as they need to be able to perceive and stand against power that is used against them. Freire (1970) explains that people can be prevented from fully developing their humanity when they are oppressed by others. They may not reach their potential as care-givers or contributors to their families and communities. Those who are oppressed are not the instigators of force, violence, or fear. Those who oppress are the ones who fail to respect the humanity of others (p. 55). Too often, the humanity of the gifted child is oppressed, just as his or her potential to learn is suppressed.

Gifted students need to learn how to recognize oppression because they may have power and because they may be victims. Because they are young, they need to be taught how to use their intelligence and talents in positive, non-oppressive ways. Developing maturity takes time,

practice, and experience. Compassion, respect for others, and responsibility for one's actions do not automatically come with intelligence and talent.

One group of people who work against the gifted are those who want schools to produce a work force that respects authority, is punctual, can follow directions, and can adequately communicate. Rarely do those who own or lead in business or industry ask for schools to produce creative and critical thinkers who can maneuver or invent beyond the capacity of existing business capabilities. These business leaders may not want the competition that fully functioning gifted graduates can bring to them. While the business and communications worlds have changed and followed the progressive thinking of Gates, Jobs, Bezos, and Zuckerberg, other people and their business worlds have been left behind or had to scramble to adjust their business plans at great costs. Gifted leaders and thinkers can shift the power stack. People in power fear the innovation and change gifted students and other innovators can bring if their talents are embraced and developed.

Gifted students often blame their giftedness for their problems and may be so intent on hiding from the negative feelings of others they leave themselves fewer opportunities for learning. They yearn to be seen as normal and to be accepted. In the same way that the powerful few can wield control and hand out hardship, the person who considers himself or herself to be average—however the mores of a society define average—has the sheer power of like numbers to throw at others. Average behaviors, average thinking, or average competition is not a force whose presence and oppressive weight can be denied when one is not average. Schools are often places where those who are different are excluded and even targeted.

All students need to understand that they have a kind of social power that can destroy others by denying the approval and access to friendship and community. Students who are not as

academically, creatively, or athletically gifted or who are not talented leaders may resent those who do have those developed talents. These students may attempt to use their power acquired through group acceptance to coerce gifted students to make the choice of either reaching for success or reaching for peer approval. School should be a safe place for all students where they can learn and grow to their full potentials without fear of social stigma. The child who exhaustively struggles and the child who effortlessly exceeds should both receive the help and support needed to fully recognize both their humanity and their abilities. Neither should become the oppressor or the oppressed.

Ferguson (2001) discusses the idea of a compensatory education class for students who score in the lower thirty percent on standardized tests. The ultimate effect of being in this room is that students are watched and controlled more closely (p. 56). One of the lasting effects of the *panopticon* is that it can cause those once almost constantly observed to believe they are still watched and to set their behaviors as though they are watched (Foucault, 1995, p. 201). They monitor their own behavior and act in the ways their watchers would have them act. In a similar way, Freire (1970) describes the oppressed as those who live in a type of “duality” (p. 48) where they realize they do not have the freedom to be themselves but have so accepted their oppressor’s views that they see themselves in this way and approach living with fear to be who they should and could be. They accept their oppression because their oppressors have impressed upon them mentally that they are the oppressed, and they fear being anyone else.

Power is not always held by the rich or the mean. Sometimes it is simply a matter of numbers, insecurity, and jealousy. In a school situation, the academically gifted are made to feel different and are caused to feel embarrassed by their differences. African-American students who strive to achieve are ridiculed for “acting white” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 203), and to fit in to their

own cultural group, they may stop trying to reach their potentials. Many academically gifted students are called names such as nerd, geeks, and dweebs, to shame them for their intellectual abilities. The goal of this ridicule is to get intellectually gifted students to refuse to use their abilities to make better grades, to receive praise from teachers, or to excel beyond predictable classroom instruction. Just as the *panopticon* (Foucault, 1995) and the oppressor attitudes eventually work even when they are not fully present, the students who attack gifted students want them to consistently cap their activities below the levels of their capabilities. These attacks make gifted student an oppressed and punished group. The challenge is to find places where the gifted students do not perceive the watcher in the *panopticon* or the cruel oppressor. Hopefully, my research will help teachers and students create those places in English classrooms and other academic places within schools for gifted students and others who suffer oppression and the constant, monitoring observations of the dominant group.

Gifted people too often are choosing to opt out. They are choosing to deny their giftedness. They are choosing to remove themselves from gifted programs. In too many cases, they are choosing to end their lives. As an educational community, we are failing our gifted students. If we happen to be gifted, we are also failing ourselves.

### **What are the Next Steps to Helping the Gifted?**

How do educators solve this first problem of the isolation and feelings of difference caused by labeling a child as gifted? Can we negate some of the negative feelings through differentiation of the learning environment? If this environment can be created, how does it sound, look, and feel to gifted students? What is the composition of the room in terms of students, teachers, resources, music, curriculum, strategies, scheduling and physical features?



What are the attitudes of the people in the classroom, and how do these attitudes affect the room's emotional atmosphere?

In the gifted English classroom, the students represent different cultures, races, genders, and preferences. My goal is to help identify the characteristics of an English classroom that is a safe place for each one of them to learn, listen, and express their ideas. Just as Freire (1985) advises that people who do not understand the poor should talk to them, people who do not understand the gifted should take the time to ask important questions. As the misunderstood poor may offer insights into the difficulties they face (Freire, 1985), the gifted may be best able to explain the difficulties they face. Their insights could be where educators find answers to the questions of how the gifted can be supported academically and socially.

Schubert, Schubert, Thomas, and Carroll (2002) trace the process of recognition, rationale, and proposed change to curriculum followed by critical reconstructionists. Giroux promotes the idea of critical pedagogy based on recognition of what Freire (1985) calls banking education, where knowledge is deposited into students and then returned back to the teacher. The knowledge never truly becomes the property of the student to manipulate, use, and develop into new thoughts and ideas (Freire, 1985). Giroux (2006) argues that when teachers offer the standard set of approved philosophies to students that the students do not necessarily accept that favored group of ideologies. Freire (1970) calls for the development of critical consciousness through praxis, the process of action and reflection. Simon (1992) gives the call to action for teachers to incorporate the stories of those who are marginalized into a critical analysis of dominant social structures. Change can then be affected through classroom conversation and study. Practically all marginalized groups count the gifted among their numbers, and together they form a group of people whose voices are not heard, whose needs are not met, and who

suffer from the oppression of others. Their group story has been told incorrectly by others, and this telling has caused them to be resented as being elitist or accused of attempting stratification in schools and the greater societies in which they live. I want to tell their stories because I want to justly tell stories of all people and invite their participation in academic conversation. Without their stories, our academic conversation as educators is inaccurate because it is skewed and incomplete.

In creating a safe place, teachers need to follow a curriculum and lesson plans that are cleansed of hurtful and confining racial and social structures still present in mainstream culture. Not doing harm to a child may not be enough. Students need to participate in a curriculum that meets the needs of a diversified population (Nieto, Bode, Kang & Raible, 2008). Ford and Harris (Ford, 2007, p. 415) offer an instructional outline for gifted multicultural education that promotes the six common levels of instruction according to Bloom's taxonomy (1956), but adds a multicultural spin to tasks that includes perceptively viewing and manipulating content material from the perspective of other cultures and developing a plan for social change in the evaluation level. Equitably addressing the needs of students of all cultures is a focus of Curriculum Studies. Tying this focus to researching the needs of gifted students of all cultures is a logical connection.

Teachers need to move to debunk the myths that are promoted in schools that suppose the success of only those children in the dominant culture. Even primary cultures and religions allow their children's literature, cartoons, games, movies, and television programming to create stereotypes and gender roles that are potentially harmful to children and the teenagers and adults they become. Christensen (2003) speaks of the dangers of the "secret education," a label credited to Ariel Dorfman, which is the insidious indoctrination in children's literature that sets for them unrealistic expectations for how they should live their lives. As children of all groups read this

literature and watch this programming, they begin to believe that girls should conduct themselves as princesses; boy should ride in to save the girls and the town; European- Americans should be those with power and control; and the smartest students are those who have wealthy families, clean clothes, abundant opportunities, and expectations from others to lead and exceed. Gifted students who do fall into this fortunate group may be more likely to have begun the process of identifying and developing their gifts, but that does not mean that students who have none of those opportunities are not highly gifted individuals. Teachers need to enable their students by trying to understand each and every child, giving value to the cultural experiences that have shaped them, and being supportive of decisions being made that may lead the child away from mainstream thinking and toward novel, individual success. In Kauchak, Eggen, and Burbank (2005), Clarkson (2003) explains that “gifted education is not a mysterious science reserved for a few geniuses” (p. 53) and that gifted children do have special needs that can be met. My research seeks to help teachers create the spaces where all students can learn freely without encumbering stereotypes. This freedom includes the rights of gifted student to learn without being hampered by the false set of presumptions that others, and they themselves, may hold about those who are gifted and talented.

By creating a safe learning environment, gifted students can be encouraged to free themselves of the need to live to a set of unrealistic expectations they may hold for themselves and others hold for them. Maybe the most unrealistic expectation is that they have to live with a heavy, excluding label. Being gifted is just one facet of a person’s makeup. Gifted people do not stop being members of their cultures. They still have a race and a heritage. They do not stop being male or female. Love is still a personal preference, and so is religion. They still claim a nationality. Their families are still their kin. They simply have discovered that they have the

potential to accomplish some task in an unusually successful way. Freeing oneself of labels is a right that people should have.

A female, African-American teacher of first grade students shared part of a poem that she had written. I had asked that the teachers, those in the second of the four-course sequence of classes required to complete a gifted endorsement certification, to share a poem, short story or illustration that offered insight into gifted children. I asked to hear the rest of the poem, but she was not ready to share so much.

#### Ungifted

The term “gifted” is not one I readily accepted  
Being Black in a predominately white school was already more than I expected

I was surrounded by brilliant minds but yet mine still worked differently  
When everyone was sure of one solution I wanted to know Why couldn't we?

Being in this class has really opened my eyes to things I didn't know  
Because honestly once I was told I was gifted I just went with the flow

I didn't question what it meant and I didn't know in what area  
But of course I wouldn't in typical uneducated America

I know you think because I'm joyful, outgoing, and free  
That a ditz little black girl gifted how could she be?

I don't fall under the stereotype weird, quiet, gifted girl  
Did you ever consider that because I'm African American I'm tired of living in that shadowed world?

And IQ who thought of that anyway well 154 last time I checked  
Often dumbing down my opinion because what I say is just not socially correct

Everyone wants to be an expert on me, my talents, and my personality  
When half the time I don't know what going on in actuality

My brain's always racing and constantly challenging you in my head  
But I've been conditioned to smile and stay quiet Only speak what was said

Even in this poem I'm sure more assumptions will be made  
I'm not even sure why it's considered a gift I'm quite sure it's a debt I've paid

As I sit here and think maybe I'm just not gifted  
The thought of this possibility alone and a weight has been lifted.  
Ungifted.

I do not want to risk making the assumptions that this poem addresses. We do, as educators, tend to speak in generalities unless we are speaking about a specific student. We just cannot speak of the thousands of students we have taught in specific terms. One sentence would take days to complete. We do, though, need to be careful when we do speak and teach in general terms that we leave room for the person to create, nurture, and express an individual's sense of self. Emotions, reactions, knowledge, dreams, plans of action, and life's images are gathered and molded into who each of us is today. The poem shows the thoughts of one, gifted individual. Can we think that others may feel this same way? We can as long as we leave those others their points of differences in the assumptions we make. Life would be easier for teachers if all of our students fit some stereotype, but teaching is not easy because we do have those different ability levels, personalities, and needs within every classroom, whether that classroom population consists primarily of students of one culture, the gifted, athletes, one gender, one age, with special needs, musicians, artists, or one socio-economic level or another.

Teachers need to open their own minds as they teach their students. Freire (1985) explains that studying should be a "form of reinventing, re-creating, [and] rewriting" (p.2). He says that readers "should be receptive to any passage that triggers a deeper reflection on any topic..." (p. 3). He warns against a "banking education" (p. 2) that has as its fundamental focus "to kill our curiosity, our inquisitive spirit, and our creativity" (p. 2) and to replace individual thoughts with an instructor's ideas. He sees study as a worldly pursuit and, as such, one that cannot be minimized to a reader's involvement only with what he or she is reading. Students

should be encouraged to follow their own paths of study and interest, to relate to the passages read in their classes from their own world views, and to constantly apply what they read to the ways they want to live. In an English classroom, a student needs to learn to read as an English scholar. In other classes, students need to learn to read as a historian, a mathematician, and as a scientist. They should be given the tools to comprehend, interpret, analyze, and manipulate content. A focused purpose and method of reading is particularly important for gifted students who perhaps read deeply to learn more or all about a topic that interests them. Knowing how to read as experts in a chosen field helps gifted students learn how to mine information and then convey their subsequent ideas in ways seen appropriate by the professionals in the field.

The ideas of all people hold value. A free exchange of ideas creates understanding. Freire (1974) discusses how people should talk with others. He explains the difference between dialogue and anti-dialogue. Dialogue works when people are talking with each other. Anti-dialogue occurs when one person is talking to others from a dominant or authoritative position. A positive “matrix” (Freire, 1974, p. 40) is created in dialogue that is “loving, humble, hopeful, trusting, [and] critical” (Freire, 1974, p. 40). One that is “loveless, arrogant, hopeless, mistrustful, [and] acritical” (Freire, 1974, p. 41) is created in anti-dialogue. A positive characteristic of a safe classroom should be one where dialogue takes place among students and with the teacher; it is not likely to be one where anyone speaks to another with disdain, contempt or feelings of superiority and entitlement. In a positive learning environment swinging and weaving around a Maypole of respect, students should be able to develop their talents as they raise, dip, and circle their own colorful ribbons of knowledge and interest.

Gagne (2011) delineates gifts as being natural abilities and talents as being competencies with each category indicating possession at the top 10% in the field by age (p. 11). He argues

that the process of turning gifts into talents requires two types of catalysts. One type of catalyst is interpersonal in nature and includes a person's physical and mental attributes. Mental attributes include awareness of self and others, motivation, and volition. Volition is considered to consist of qualities such as effort, perseverance, and autonomy (p. 11). The other type of catalyst is environmental and includes three groups of influences: *milieu*, individual, and provisions (Gagne, 2011, p. 11). One's *milieu* is the cultural and social world in which one lives. The individual influences are the significant people in life such as parents, family, teachers, mentors, and peers. Provisions include the curriculum, pedagogy, grouping, enrichment, and acceleration to which one is exposed and under which one learns (p. 11). Curriculum Studies addresses the importance of each of the attributes and influences discussed by Gagne (2011). For the person to be happy and the child to be educated, the physical and mental person should be addressed with care, respect and encouragement. The environment should be as positive, challenging, and nurturing as possible. No one influence or attribute can be ignored or slighted. This attention to the whole person is just as important to a gifted individual as it is for any other person.

Although he is talking of actual, physical places, Freire (1970) believes that teachers may have to go where there are students who need to learn. When working with gifted students, I also believe teachers often need to go where the students are mentally. Just as Freire's poor wait in the familiarity of their neighborhoods, the gifted students often wait in their own mental worlds where they are knowledgeable and adept in many ways, needy and lacking in others. They create their worlds of passionate interests, but if someone does not help them apply their superior knowledge in one area to living in the world and learning in other areas, they can be almost as non-functioning as someone who is illiterate. When teachers arrive at Freire's place, the first words learned may need to be "generative words" (1985, p.12). These words have strong

connotative meanings to the learner, which may be cultural in nature. Learning significant words empowers people to discuss those situations and ideas that matter to them and make them feel important in their own worlds. I changed the way I choose the vocabulary in close reads, a strategy for addressing vocabulary and handling other aspects of complex text. I now choose the words that I think have the strongest personal value to my students rather than the words most likely to be on the ACT or SAT. My PSAT and SAT scores were higher my last year in the classroom than they had been in ten years. I believe it is because my students began to feel a strong affinity for the words they were learning and a greater connection to their own among the literature and classroom discourse. Freire's culture circles (Souto-Manning, 2010) which are created based on reflective discourse, critical thinking, cultural awareness, problem posing (Freire, 1997), and problem solving are a much deeper immersion into the lives of students in the classroom. I have never promoted one circle that did not bring passion, revelation, and connection as narratives were told. The experience results in writings that hold relevant critical thinking delivered in strong and appropriate personal voices.

Gifted students need more than just core subjects, though some of them love math, English, science, and history. Others, though, are passionate about art, drama, and music. Maxine Greene (2000) presents her case for the importance of arts in education. Imagination, she believes has to be freed and cultivated, and she thinks that experiences with all aspects as the arts galvanize the imagination. School cannot be a place dry of beauty. Gifted students who are passionate about the arts need the opportunity to develop their talents and follow their passions. They need to be able to share their ideas and creativity with others, so that they, too, may come to more deeply love and more completely appreciate art in all its forms. Perhaps every classroom should integrate art as a way of self-expression.



When someone has high potential, that potential may be nurtured and developed “at certain times, under certain circumstances, and with appropriate levels of support, time, effort, and personal investments and choices” (Reis & Renzulli, 2009, p. 235). If the gifted want to turn the potential into talents, they may need help and support in the form of shared knowledge and skills and offered encouragement, stability, and acceptance.

Ideally, without labeling anyone, all people should receive the support, mentoring, education, and opportunities they need to reach the potential they have, especially when the one label they have is that of student. An educational Utopia where all are perfectly and equitably served may never exist, but it can always be the goal. One step I, along with others, see as critical for reaching that goal is for educators, researchers and policy makers to continue to offer support that helps gifted students reach their potentials.

### **Why do the Gifted Matter?**

All people matter as individuals, and they matter collectively as members of the groups they are born into and the ones that they form. Respect and caring for all people should guide the thinking of education and the attitudes that prompt the behaviors of human interaction.

Why are some educators, parents, politicians, and other students so determined that the gifted students should not receive all of the supplies, academic guidance, facilities, support, and opportunities they require? What would happen if every child with Bill Gate’s aptitude spent time feeding his or her passions? Where could we and they be if instead of wilting in the corners of classrooms, playgrounds, dens, and cubicles they were in front of microscopes, computers, simulators, and lab stations with the crowds silently cheering them on and giving support to their efforts? What if in the field of cancer research were a hundred people who could impose change and progress in the field of medicine in the same way that Gates has in the field of

technology? So many times we hear people say they can not find a book worth reading. What if a thousand more gifted authors were writing every day? What if gifted food scientists were working every day to bring clean, pure foods to every table, not just in our country, but in the world? Gifted people affect change. They dream with fewer parameters confining their ideas and have the mental capacity to lasso dreams and make them goals. They can flip goals to the completed task side of the page and make a new list of goals before others catch up to their advanced understanding and know how to harness their new accomplishments. Building on their talents and gifts, they can create a new reality. This reality is one that can shock a population that is not prepared for change that comes without warning and alters previous perceptions of what is possible. The gifted often are not encouraged because people are unsure of how to cope with what they may create. Almost any parent of a gifted child can offer insight into the paradox of pushing a child to be all he or she can while withholding all of the materials and freedom they need. People outside of the gifted circle often want the gifted to give a controlled performance. Gifted students have a difficult time pandering to that poverty of freedom and wealth of outside, less-intelligent control.

Some groups are recognizing that people who have the ability to make innovative contributions in the workplace and in fields that determine what will take place in workplaces internationally are a commodity whose development cannot be ignored. These people are the ones who are likely to advance society in all areas (Kell, et al., 2013). The societies who help their gifted individuals to develop their talents are the ones who are most likely to experience the growth and well-being these individuals can contribute to their home population. Only 2% of the population earns a doctoral degree, but 23% of the top 1% in ability earns a doctoral degree

(Lubinski and Benbow, 2006). Gifted individuals tend to want to learn all they can about the topic that becomes the focus of their attention.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF GIFTEDNESS

The literature concerning gifted individuals seeks to address the challenges of how to best serve the needs of gifted students in educational settings. In comparison to regular education studies, there is a relative dearth of research on gifted students. Because gifted students are a specific population of students, research findings on regular education students cannot be assumed to be applicable to gifted students. This circumstance necessarily leaves substantial holes in our understanding of many of the specific challenges and needs of the gifted.

Much of the literature in gifted education that has been completed is based on experience concerning teaching and observing gifted students. In addition to researchers, many parents and teachers have authored articles sharing insights based upon their experiences. These articles are often valuable, perceptive, and packed with ideas and guidelines. They may include statements such as “research shows” or “research indicates,” but they are not empirically-based: No actual research other than personal or professional experience is mentioned. Even educational researchers are beginning to depend on their names and reputations to validate their opinions and new ideas.

The background provided for this study places a heavy emphasis on the research in the area of gifted education that is empirically-based. The research presented below consists of observational studies. No levels of variables were manipulated nor were control groups formed to try to make statements about how gifted students’ characteristics, behaviors, or understandings are different in comparison with other groups of students or different in comparison to another situation, context, or type of instruction. In the absence of experimental designs, researchers have not sought to attribute to the results to a specific influence or cause, but rather have sought to

describe observations and understand the observations through perspectives of students, teachers, administrators and parents. Observational studies are common in social science research, particularly in educational research, where manipulation of variables is often not feasible nor is it ethical. While experimental studies help hone in on cause and effect relationship among key variables, many phenomenon related to gifted education are not yet understood well enough to engage in hypothesis testing through experimental research. The field is still trying to develop robust hypotheses—to clarify what it means to be gifted and to generate theories about the complex relationships among giftedness, classrooms, social interactions, learning and succeeding.

### **Early Studies of Gifted Students Identified through Intelligence Test Scores**

Terman studied 1528 gifted children who had a score on the Stanford-Benet of 135 or higher and began publishing his results in 1925 in *Genetic Studies of Genius* (Davis et al., 2011, p. 6). The last of Terman’s interviews were conducted in the late 1970s (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). The longitudinal study indicated that a majority of the students grew to be successful men and women (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). This tendency toward success continues to be seen in more recent longitudinal studies of the gifted (Kell, et al., 2013).

Leta Hollingworth studied a larger population of gifted students than Terman (Davis et al., 2011). She began a special school for the gifted (Coleman, 1999), and she wrote about the emotional needs of gifted students. She recognized the challenges faced by an individual who has the “intelligence of an adult and the emotions of a child combined in a childish body” (Delisle, 1999, p. 28). She helped to promote the idea that gifted children need gifted services for both academic and emotional reasons.

### **Areas of Giftedness**

In 1985, Howard Gardner proposed that students could be gifted in seven areas: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, interpersonal, spatial, intrapersonal and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994). Later, Gardner (1995) added an eighth area of intelligence termed the naturalist. A main result of his work was in promoting or allowing students who are talented in areas other than linguistics to receive services in their areas. Thus, his work was a step toward opening the gifted door and allowing other students to enter the room where specialized, individual help and encouragement can be found.

Others have argued that gifts are natural abilities and that talents are skills that have been developed (Gagne, 2007). If one believes this distinction, then the terms cannot be used interchangeably. Gagne (2007) believes these natural abilities appear in four possible categories that include physical, social, intellectual, and creative giftedness. A gifted person may be gifted in one to four of these categories. Assuming that if a person is identified as gifted that he or she is gifted in all categories could be an incorrect assumption (p. 94). Gagne (2007) also explains that the “range of performance is as large within the gifted or talented population as it is within the regular population” (p. 98). These two observations have great importance in the gifted and talented classroom. Even students identified as gifted may not work within “four standard deviations” (p. 98) of each other, and a student who is highly gifted in one area may struggle in all others.

### **Social Support**

Social support can influence the learning of a gifted student. The term Gagne (2007) gives to characteristics that are not part of the identification process, but are factors and circumstances that greatly influence the development of talent is “catalysts” (p. 99). These

factors fall into the three basic categories, which include intrapersonal awareness, environmental conditions and support, and chance (Gagne, 2007, p. 99).

Gagne (2007) described environmental catalysts as support factors considered important for the development of talents. Environmental factors include support from parents, teachers, and peers as well as conditions within the family and the classroom (p. 99). Rinn, Reynolds, and McQueen (2011) explored the types of perceived social support by gifted students and the results of this support on their self-concepts. Their study involved the identification of groups of gifted student who had similar arrangements of social support. Two groups of students who attended summer camps were studied. One group attended a middle grades camp, and one group attended a camp for high school gifted students. Though data were gathered from 245 participants, 77% of the students were white. Only 19 were Pacific Islander or Asian, and only 11 were African American (Rinn, Reynolds, & McQueen, 2011, p. 375). The data does not generalize to the entire population of gifted students, but the findings do have implications for my study.

The gifted students studied by Rinn, Reynold, and McQueen (2011) fell into three general groups. One pod of students perceived that they were supported from outside of the school from parents and friends and not from classmates or teachers. A second set of students believed they were supported by teachers and parents and not supported by classmates or other peers. The third group of students believed that they received their support from their friends and not from classmates, parents, or teachers. The results indicated that few of the 245 participants believed that they received support from their classmates. Only one group believed that they received social support from their teachers. Differences in the type of positive self-concept could vary among gender and based on the source of the support, but the study indicated that a positive

self-concept was present when support was perceived, regardless of the source (Rinn, Reynold, and McQueen (2011).

Pfeiffer (2013) cautions that while many programs for the gifted address the potential for academic success or what he calls “head strengths” (p. 93), not many help gifted individuals to develop “strengths of the heart” (p. 93). Six emotional strengths identified by Pfeiffer (2013) as being underdeveloped in gifted children are humility, persistence, kindness, enthusiasm, playfulness, and gratitude. He cautions that the want of any or all of these six qualities contributes to the lack of achievement experienced by those gifted individuals who have the academic attributes that should propel them to the greatest levels of success. He proposes that schools should teach gifted children how to acquire these strengths (Pfeiffer, 2013).

The need to know and understand self seems to grow as students move toward their middle school and teenage years. When Garrett and Moltzen (2011) studied a set of female writers from the ages of 15 to 17 who each declared herself to be a gifted and talented writer, they found that motivation to write commonly shifted from imagination in childhood to response to life situations and personal experiences as teenagers. Whether fantastical in nature or emotionally responsive to reality, the girls reported that the significant influence and inspiration for writing was “from within” (p. 177) as teenagers as it had been for them as children. Friends outside of their writing groups or classes and parents were inspirational as sources of ideas, but they were not noted as being needed as part of a support group. Some girls reportedly developed a shared trust with others considered to be “writing friends” (p. 176). Writing friends offered feedback that the writers considered to be valuable. The students generally indicated that parents and teachers lost their influence with writers over time. Teachers were eventually seen as hindrances to writing because they dictated that writing was done according to their



specifications (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011). This finding has strong implications for the English classroom where guided writings are often assigned to help struggling writers, to set low-end boundaries in an attempt to have a minimum length, and to design writings so they better fit the confines of a specific rubric.

More generally, gifted students may lack passion for school work or classroom activities. Students with non-academic talents were reported to have greater passion for their talents than gifted students have for school work (Fredricks, Alfeld, Eccles, 2009). Many of these gifted students expressed the importance of “being smart” (Fredricks et al., 2009, p. 24). While the sample of students with non-academic talents tended to have more choice in the activities they chose to participate than the gifted sample of students, who had to follow course requirements set by their schools and states, Fredricks et al. (2009) largely attribute the lack of passion displayed by the gifted sample about schoolwork as a direct result of the needs of gifted students not being met in schools; they seem to have lost interest in learning and maintained only an interest in making good grades and being smart (Fredricks et al., 2009).

Factors contributing to gifted students’ lack of passion or enthusiasm for learning in a school environment may include teachers, other students, and an audience (or lack thereof). Fredericks, Alfeld, and Eccles (2010) report that gifted students often explained that teachers were part of the reason they lost their passions for learning; teachers who were not passionate about teaching created roadblocks for these students. An expert teacher in a writing class, though, was considered to be a positive resource (Garrett & Moltzen, 2011). Gifted students also listed other students who were not passionate about learning as being problems in the classroom for both the gifted and the teachers who were responsible for teaching both groups of students (Fredericks, Alfeld & Eccles, 2010). Students with non-academic talents indicated that their

abilities were often noted by the public. Appreciation for their abilities increased the pleasure these talented students received from pursuing their passions. Gifted students did not often speak of receiving enthusiastic public recognition for their academic accomplishments throughout the school years (Fredericks, Alfeld & Eccles, 2010).

If gifted individuals do exhibit a lack of such qualities as those identified by Pfeiffer (2013), the hope of finding peer support in a classroom peopled by gifted students does not sound promising. If the quality and productivity of time spent in the classroom can be influenced by perceived support, apathy, or even active non-support from teachers and classmates, then gifted children face a stiff disadvantage unless, as Pfeiffer (2013) suggests, positive personality characteristics are part of the teaching agenda. A positive self-concept can exist when gifted individuals perceive that they have support from some source. A poignant question may concern what happens to self-concept when gifted students perceive that they have no support or that the support they receive is outweighed by the active dislike they experience in their relationships with their classmates.

### **Curriculum Opportunities**

Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery and Little (2002) sought to determine whether teaching language arts units based on standards and including differentiation for gifted students could result in greater progress for the gifted. The units were written with the purpose of developing skills in critical thinking, persuasive writing, literary analysis, communication and listening. Results showed that students did benefit from differentiation in complexity of the readings, in participation in activities that allowed greater independent challenges in research and inquiry, and in the depth of critical thinking involved in questioning and product development. Gifted students did well when they were specifically taught thinking strategies and when material was

taught for deeper understanding. This progress was indicated in gifted students in second through ninth grades. This research is aligned with others' claims that gifted students will likely benefit from programs designed specifically to fit their "unique profile[s] of abilities and interests" (Pfeiffer, 2013, p. 91).

### **Classroom Environment**

Olthouse (2013) questions traditional definitions of literacy, talent, and giftedness. Her premise is that, given the right context to display their talents, many people could be considered gifted. She calls for the creation of "smart spaces" (p. 248) in educational settings where students can display and advance their interests and abilities. Within these contexts, a variety of conditions are created that are deemed necessary to support the emergence of specific types of talents. Within the English classroom she promotes the use of the multiliteracies theory (p.246) as the most relevant, current definition of literacy. The aspect of this theory that applies to the classroom setting is the one that defines literacy as being situated. Those students whose talents do not require advanced use of traditional English still need smart spaces within English classrooms that help them to develop their skills as gifted communicators in less traditional avenues. Olthouse (2013) further suggests that within a learning event "situated practice" (p. 249) should be available where people (professors, students, or others) with varying current knowledge about a topic or assignment can work together. Situated practice may involve the availability of technology as a means to link those who are not in the same physical location (Olthouse, 2013).

Working together in groups was found by Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery and Little (2002) to bring positive results for gifted elementary students. Whether the groups were the self-contained classroom, gifted pull-out groupings, gifted clusters, or in the language arts block, the

students excelled while involved in language arts units that were designed to allow accommodation through differentiation for gifted individuals. Gender and socio-economic differences did not affect the degree of positive growth indicated by the changes in pre-test and post-test scores.

Classmates can impact gifted students, their interest in learning and their ability to succeed in the classroom. Challenges were found in classrooms due to the nature of gifted children, which include the tendencies to ask in-depth questions, to become quickly bored and impatient, to be critical of others, to act as perfectionists, to dislike mundane classwork, and to be aware of being different from others (Park & Oliver, 2009, p. 339). Teachers responded to these gifted personality and learner traits when they differentiated in content organization, instructional strategies, and flexibility in assessing progress towards content understanding. They also used grouping strategies, peer tutoring, and individualized support; addressed perfectionist tendencies; and created a “psychologically safe classroom environment” (p. 342). As the authors stated, this learning environment that fosters participation, achievement, interest development, creativity, and classroom discussion seems to be a result of the awareness the teacher has and a willingness to address situations in the classroom rather than ignore them.

Other factors not traditionally thought of as classroom features may impact gifted students. For example, Garrett and Moltzen (2011) found that music became an inspirational necessity to two-thirds of the gifted and talented teenaged female writers they surveyed (p. 176). The girls indicated that they were moved by the lyrics as well as the music. These results indicated that a classroom in which students are asked to write may greatly benefit from offering student access to music both with and without lyrics. This research finding is not surprising when considering other studies that have found that talented students participating in sports or arts

expressed more passion about the object of their passion than academically gifted students express for classroom learning (Fredricks, Alfeld, & Eccles, 2009). Of further interest would be the genres of music and foci of lyrics that could serve as inspiration to gifted writers.

### **Sense of Self for Gifted Students**

Silverman (2011) says that “to be gifted is to be different” (p. 2). She subscribes to a definition of giftedness that is phenomenological in that it addresses the way that gifted individuals perceive their experiences (2011, p. 2) and was provided originally by the Columbus Group (1991):

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

Uneven development occurs when gifted students advance in their areas of giftedness well ahead of their peers, but physically they may be on the same level of development as most of the people their ages. When individuals are at one level mentally and another level physically, they may have difficulty understanding who they are emotionally and socially (Silverman, 2011). Gifted children may feel they lead uneven lives.

Coping with the asynchronous development impacts how gifted students develop a sense of self, which can generally be defined as a set of beliefs about the characteristics that create a personal identity. Aspects of this identity may embrace a person’s views on his or her sexuality, ability to make friends, academic capabilities, cultural affiliations, or religious associations.

Factors shaping these views may include people with whom the student is involved at home and school. Gifted students also may have other characteristics in addition to being gifted that strongly interact with the development of their senses of self. The following exposition describes some of the key factors that influence a gifted student's sense of self.

The standards developed in 2010 by the National Association for Gifted Children consistently address the fundamental ideas that gifted children are gifted all day long and should be served in all school settings and that giftedness continuously evolves and is dynamic (Sanderson & Greenberger, p. 45). Understanding that gifted children are always gifted is important. Giftedness cannot be turned off and on. For gifted students their giftedness is often the lens through which they see their worlds. It pervades and influences much they do. Gifted students do not develop their giftedness only when they are in a pull-out program or a group within a heterogeneous classroom. They shift their perceptions, augment their ideas, and move often toward talent development. They are thinkers, and their minds are rarely quiet.

Gifted achievers are those students who are diligently striving to move forward in their goals. A gifted underachiever does not work to accomplish what he or she is capable of doing or attempt to learn what is within his or her ability to understand. Gifted students have high academic self-perceptions whether they are achievers or underachievers, though gifted underachievers and achievers were found to significantly differ in terms of their (1) motivation and self-regulation, (2) attitudes towards teachers, (3) attitudes towards school, and (4) goal valuation (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). The latter, goal valuation, was found to be important for determining whether a gifted student would be an achiever: Identifying whether gifted students value academic goals can be a key step in determining whether the student will want to reach those goals enough to monitor behavior in such a way that the plans for success are made and

followed (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Students who participate in advanced classes, have high SAT scores, and earn high grades feel that they are academically capable (Wilson, Siegle, McCoach, Little & Reis, 2014). Two factors identified as significant to self-concept are the perceived difficulty of course work and whether students in self-analysis compared favorably to others as students and as learners. Student self-concept, which is how one views his or her success in school endeavors, seems to be a higher indicator of future academic success than learner self-concept, which is how one views his or her ability to acquire and understand knowledge (Wilson et al., 2014).

For those students considered to be academically gifted, the comparisons made between themselves and others are important. They need to be members of a school community where the comparisons have some worth to them as learners and students (Wilson et al., 2014). Interestingly, these comparisons are only for personal evaluations and do not include the questioning of how others perceive them as students and as learners. Their peers in these situations are just the standard against which they measure their abilities. Berlin (2009) examined how students perceive being labeled as talented and gifted, how they perceive others view their giftedness, and how both of these perceptions vary depending on the level of giftedness the student has. She found that highly gifted students viewed social immersion into life with their gifted peers more positively than moderately gifted students who ranked social interaction with gifted peers at a low level. Moderately gifted students felt that their being labeled as gifted was positive because it increased their self-confidence and made their parents happy; neither of these positives was ranked as high by the highly gifted students. An important conclusion based on findings from this study is that the level of giftedness a student has affects their perceptions of their giftedness and how being gifted and talented impacts their academic and home lives.

Among gifted students, behavior was highly correlated with happiness and personal perceptions of intelligence. Students' self-esteem was tied to happiness, ability to cope with anxiety, and self-perceptions of behavior (Foley-Nicpon, Rickels, Assouline & Richards, 2012, p. 233). Gifted students also appear to gain self-esteem and their self-concept from the self they present to their peers and others. Perceptions of social stress, intelligence, appearance, self-reliance, approval from peers, ability to cope with anxiety, and self-reliance appear to be positively influenced by being labeled gifted, and gifted students had high opinions of their intelligence and their behaviors (Foley-Nipcon et al., 2012).

While gifted students have high opinions of themselves as students, they may experience emotional intensity due to their asynchronous development (Silverman, 2011). Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration matches the characteristics of gifted students in the area of over excitability (Mendaglio & Tiller, 2006, p. 68). Dabrowski's research helps explain the intensity of reactions that can be expected from gifted students. Piechowski (1992) is cited by Silverman (2011) as building on Dabrowski's theories and offering the statement that "cognitive complexity, emotional sensitivity, heightened imagination, and magnified sensations combine" (p. 4) to create a different way of experiencing being alive.

Webb (1994) provided two reasons why gifted individuals may have personal, unrealistically high expectations: (1) they have the ability to imagine what an ideal performance would be, and (2) they have the emotional intensity to want to reach the ideal. Silverman (2011) argues that while perfectionism may be a sign of insecurity in most individuals, in gifted people it is a process of fully being able to imagine the best. The gifted can develop problems with perfectionism which can lead to problems with self-esteem and self-actualization (Clark, 2008).



The idea of self-actualization, according to Clark (2008) is one that schools often include in their mission or goal statements, but helping a student develop to that extent is not a typical outcome of education. Self-esteem can grow and is necessary for self-actualization to be a possibility. Gifted students will not self-actualize if self-esteem is a problem for them.

### **The Role of Adults in Gifted Students' Sense of Self**

The expectations that teachers, parents, and other adults set for gifted students can significantly shape a gifted student's sense of self. Clark (2008) points out that society in general can greatly benefit when a gifted child reaches self-actualization. A gifted, talented individual can be seen as a commodity, and the expectations of others can contribute to the high expectations they may accept as individuals. Adults can often provide expectations that are too high, too low, or too restrictive.

One problem, according to Webb (1994) is that gifted children, especially those who are creative, tend not to conform. Adults who want the gifted to focus their talents in an area that is not the most compelling area to the gifted person or who want the gifted person to develop his or her talents in a particular way may feel hostile or upset when their plans are not followed. When the gifted feel this hostility, they may keep their talents hidden to prevent discomfort for all involved. Hiding his or her talents then becomes an integral part of who the gifted student is.

Withdrawal from tense situations of high expectations, criticism from others, and self-criticism in situations where others are upset and upsetting, in addition to a tendency to inflate episodes of self-evaluation, can lead to depression for the gifted. On the opposite end of the spectrum, however, adults may not understand the potential a gifted student has and set expectations too low. In these instances, gifted students are often caught in learning situations

that are not adequately challenging, which may create hours of boredom and may also result in depression or a lack of interest in participating in learning (Webb, 1994).

Teachers and administrators are adults who may greatly influence a gifted student's sense of self. In a study comparing gifted achievers and non-achievers, gifted achievers' opinions towards school and teachers were more positive than non-achievers (McCoach and Siegle, 2003). Questions can be asked, though, about the circular nature of the underachieving student and his or her views of teachers and school. Does a dislike of teachers and school create the tendency to underachieve, or does underachieving create negative feedback from teachers and others in a school situation which leads to a more negative opinion of both than that held by achievers? The research has not yet determined where the circle begins (McCoach and Siegle, 2003). Indications are, though, that gifted students who underachieve may do so because they are bored, and underachieving often leads to negative feedback from adults, a greater potential to drop out of school, and disruptive misbehavior (Clark, 2008).

Although one solution for gifted students who have a negative perspective of school may be self-directed learning, research has shown that gifted students may enjoy the classroom setting to acquire the specific knowledge they seek. Periathiruvadi and Rinn (2012) cite Olszewski-Kubilius and Lee (2004) as reporting that gifted students enjoy on-line classes because they are challenging, fast-paced or self-paced, and can be advanced or accelerated, but they do miss time spent with their teachers and peers in a classroom setting.

### **Support Structures for Gifted Self-Concept**

Among gifted peers, students may celebrate their talents, but when they are with peers who are not in gifted programs, the gifted may hide their talents for the purpose of being more acceptable to others (Silverman, 2011). The cost of feeling the need to hide one's real self can

be high. When individual differences are not accepted and conformity is valued, the experience can be emotionally damaging for the gifted (Silverman, 2011). This lack of support for the individual can influence an individual's ability to learn (Gagne, 2007).

Rinn, Reynolds, and McQueen (2011) explored perceived social support by gifted students and the resulting influences on their self-concepts. The students identified three general types of support. One group perceived that they were supported by people outside of school, which included their parents and friends. This group did not feel supported by peers or teachers. A second group felt that they were supported by adults in their lives, which included parents and teachers. This group did not feel supported by classmates or peers. The third group indicated that they only received support from their friends, and not their parents, teachers, or peers. Few of the 243 participants in the study identified their classmates as sources of social support. Only one group thought that they received support from their teachers. When students felt they had any support, regardless of the source, their self-concepts were positive (Rinn, Reynolds, & McQueen (2011). The results of the study must be surprising to people who participate in the educational process in schools. Classmates and teachers would probably be the first sources of support listed if teachers were asked to name primary sources of student support. This study points out the need to talk with students and discover their perceptions rather than assigning perceptions to them.

### **Conclusions**

Current research in the area of gifted education spans a wide variety of topics and provides initial insights into the characteristics of gifted children that help shape this study. While studies discussed are related to my line of research, none were *directly* related to my research that seeks to understand how to create a “safe space” in the English classroom for high

school gifted students to learn how to effectively communicate as speakers and writers with their own styles and in their own voices. Drawing commonalities from the body of research in order to inform my research is difficult because each study is situated in such a specific environment, grade level, and content area. Further, though each of the constructs addressed through these studies are important to understand about gifted learners, each research area also requires additional research before findings from any of the studies become accepted knowledge about gifted students. The results of the studies need to be replicated across other samples of gifted students, classrooms, schools, etc. Nonetheless, these studies provide useful insights to begin understanding gifted students.

Most of the research efforts to address the challenges of serving the needs of gifted students are focused on specific activities that help students to think more deeply or organizational strategies that allow gifted students a greater range of choice and scope. Many of these findings are in line with what I observed in my classroom, specifically, gifted students respond to activities and environments incorporating music, a teacher can inspire or shut down learning, and gifted students need to address and further formulate questions that inspire deep thinking that is both critical and creative. However, I found that the problems facing the gifted in current classroom situations do not revolve simply around their learning potential or their select interests, though these facets of their school experiences are important. Although the emotional differences of the gifted are acknowledged, how to embrace these differences and to learn through them, around them, or using them as a foundation is rarely addressed or studied. Research abounds comparing gifted students to those students who are not identified as academically gifted. The conflicts between the groups result in angst on both sides. The research that seems to be missing is the conflict between students who are identified as gifted. The idea

that if schools could achieve classroom separation of the gifted from the rest of the student population, then the gifted would excel is one that requires further study. My goal is to identify the classroom characteristics, specifically in the content area of English that allow or even inspire gifted students to learn at their full potential.

Garrett and Moltzen (2011) suggest that a challenge faced by teachers is helping gifted students develop their gifts so that they become talents. Reis and Renzulli (2009) posit that giftedness is, "...developmental-in some children and adults with high potential, at certain times, under certain circumstances, and with appropriate levels of support, time, effort, and personal investments and choices" (p. 235). My study seeks to add to the research by helping identify which times, which choices, what circumstances, and what levels of support, time and effort are involved in creating optimal conditions in which gifted high school students can best learn about literature, communication, and self. Prior research in this area—even if results of which do not generalize directly to my research—will help inform my queries as I seek to identify these conditions for gifted students.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to identify key characteristics of an English language arts classroom that make it a safe space for gifted student to share and develop views, ideas, and knowledge. To gain insights into characteristics of these safe spaces, I focused my inquiry on the direct source: gifted students. I conducted interviews with students to identify major themes concerning how teachers, peers, learning activities, and classroom set-up impact classroom environment. Through analysis of interview data, I sought to understand student perceptions of the extent to which a gifted English classroom is a safe learning space and what characteristics impact the degree to which students feel safe.

The purpose of focusing on student perceptions was to eliminate the assumption that teachers and school leaders know what students think and feel and believe. Teachers create what they may hope to be safe spaces for learning based on the conditions of what they believe students want and need or what is comfortable for the teacher. My concern is that even with the best intentions, teachers are at least somewhat disconnected from student perceptions, and they may not understand how to create a safe space. Teachers especially may not be fully aware of the impact of social media and other circumstances outside of the classroom on student perception of emotional safety. In seeking to understand from gifted students how high school English teachers can help to create English classrooms that are safe spaces to participate and learn—especially in the broadcast society within which students are learning to cope, I wanted to understand what types of learning environments are perceived as being safe enough to offer opinions, explore self, and learn how to communicate with other people in academic conversation and presentations. Then, I wanted to share that knowledge with school leaders and teachers in an effort to help

create a better classroom situation for gifted students and, perhaps, other students who share gifted students' perceptions of classroom environments.

### **Research Design**

To address my research questions stated in Chapter 1, I used a basic qualitative study design and interviewed gifted students with the goal of understanding how these students develop meaning in and understanding of the lives they live as students who are labeled gifted (Merriam, 2009). I interviewed a sample of gifted students participating in honors and AP English Language Arts classes. I believed that gifted students had the answers I needed. They do speak, defend their ideas, validate or negate the ideas of others, and grow in the process of becoming the people they want to be in some English classrooms as they learn the communications skills necessary for personal, social, academic, and professional success. Interviewing students enabled me to explore their ideas, feelings, and beliefs in a flexible way that allowed for topics explored between the students and myself as a researcher to have had both depth and breath, to be anticipated and unexpected, to be original and all too familiar. Facilitating conversation where a student expresses him or herself and discovers parts of self through expression was home to me, as a teacher who fought for safe spaces for students to be and grow for 30 plus years. I took that experience as a teacher who learned how to elicit—and then protect—honest expression from gifted selves, along with my training as a researcher, to guide a systematic inquiry. I helped them to share and explain their understandings of their gifts.

### **Recruitment and Selection of Participants**

I interviewed a selection of students from different high schools. To participate, students were enrolled in high school and had been identified by their district as gifted students. Further, these students were enrolled in an honors or AP English classroom.

To solicit participants, I contacted AP English teachers in a twelve county area. I selected these teachers from different high schools. I began with Briarcreek High School, Cedar River High School and Edward Maxwell High School. (Names have been changed.) These three high schools serve a diverse population of students with respect to socioeconomic status, race, and achievement levels. In my position as a RESA consultant, I work with superintendents, principals and teachers in each of these counties. If needed, I could contact teachers from the other 10 counties that have high schools in the area.

I asked each teacher I selected to distribute a flyer to each of the students who was identified as gifted in their AP and honors classes. The flyer invited students to participate in my study. To qualify for participation, students under 18 years of age provided minor consent and parental consent. I interviewed students fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen years of age.

Among the students who volunteered to participate, I planned to use criterion sampling (Patton, 1990) to select three students to participate per teacher. This method was not needed because I did not have enough students to volunteer to participate.

I anticipated that saturation would be met with two to three sets of three students. I planned, however, to recruit more teachers and their students until saturation was sufficient (as described below) or until 12 students had been interviewed.

### **Data Collection**

I wrote a letter for the principal of each school who had a student participating in an interview. The purpose of the principal letter was to describe the goals of the research and nature of the students' participation in the research. I offered to share my key findings with each principal once my research was complete. By communicating with principals, I sought to foster a collaborative partnership with schools from which I was sampling students. In addition to



showing my sincere appreciation for permission for student participation in important research, I wanted to share my findings with these key stakeholders. Principals are a target audience for outcomes of this type of research; decisions they make impact the degree to which classrooms are safe spaces for gifted students.

Data was collected through student interviews. A list of prepared questions guided each interview (See Appendix A). The purpose of the questions was to solicit student observations of characteristics and events within the classroom or that affect the classroom environment. The questions invited students to discuss the characteristics of self, classmates, classroom, and activities and strategies that foster a safe learning environment.

Using a semi-structured format (Merriam, 2009), my prepared questions for the student interviews first asked students to address how they view themselves as gifted people. Next, they responded to questions about their classmates who were both gifted and non-gifted. They shared their thoughts and feelings about their teachers, their physical classroom spaces, and the activities and strategies that teachers used to construct lessons. They then addressed what had happened in classrooms in the past and what they predict or dream could happen in the future. The questions then brought students to an awareness of what is happening in the present. From this point questions led them logically to move to what should happen in the future. Based on student responses, I asked follow-up questions to clarify responses or to further prompt students to explain their thinking.

Each interview took place during or just after school in a classroom or another room in the school where the conversation was private. Interviews that took place during school hours twice lasted longer than a class period in that particular school because the student had finished high school classes for the day and had time available before leaving for their college classes.

No interview lasted more than one and one-half hours. Interviews taking place after school lasted less than one and one-half hours.

Each interview was digitally recorded, and I took notes after each session to record any meaningful gestures, facial expressions, or events that occurred and were not captured by the audio recordings.

### **Interviewee Analysis**

I transcribed the audio recordings. These transcriptions facilitated my coding of the data. While precise coding directions were available to follow (i.e., Saldana; 2013), the variety of coding options offered different ways to explore and make sense of the data. I maintained flexibility to “deal with ambiguity” (Saldana, 2013, p. 36), a characteristic of researchers who code successfully. I did not choose a specific coding method other than annotating until I had read through the texts of student interviews because I had no clear indication until then of which method would best serve the information to be coded. My initial read and marking of the transcripts was “open coding” (Merriam; 2009; p. 178), where I made notes in the margins referencing any comments that seemed relevant to the research topic or material. After marking interview texts, I moved from initial codes to categories that were more theoretical and thematic with each cycle. I sought to avoid common problems with coding such as tendencies to objectify the material or reduce richness of the material to phrases (Saldana, 2013). As needed, I used analytic memos (Saldana, 2013, p. 43) because of my connection to the material.

While using critical components of discovery Saldana (2013) describes as “interpretive leeway” (p. 208) and even “imagination and creativity” (p. 208), I focused on Wolcott (2009) and Saldana’s (2013) guidelines of expectations as well as their encouragement of deviation that provided potential for stronger, more meaningful results in a study. Following Saldana (2013)

still, I left no leeway involving ethics; I was scrupulously ethical regarding conscientious handling of data and respectful association with research participants.

After coding and analyzing each set of interviews from a single teacher, I evaluated the degree to which saturation had occurred. Saturation occurred when the comments, perceptions and ideas from different students were becoming repetitive, indicating that the sample sufficiently represented the breadth and depth of perceptions held by the target population (Glaser & Strauss, 2009).

### **Conclusions**

My study was one that sought through the interviews and interview analyses to hear information that would not be heard if only quantitative measurement was employed. I expected the analyses of interviews through coding to uncover major themes concerning the safe learning environment for gifted students in an English classroom. Thus, the purpose of my study was to identify and describe the key features of safe learning spaces from the perspective of students. This type of research was a necessary precursor to conducting future research in this area; before experimental research or larger-scale research could be conducted in this area, the fundamental essence of the phenomena of a safe learning space for gifted students should be better understood. Future research may build upon my research to study how the presence or absence of the features my research indicates are key for safe learning spaces systematically impacts not only student perceptions of emotional safety, but also student learning, engagement, and growth as a result of the degree to which the learning environment is safe.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Each of the first four principals who I asked for permission to interview gifted students in their schools granted their approval. All four schools were in the same Southeastern state. I could not interview in the first school because the school has no Advanced Placement or honors classes. In this school the advanced and gifted students are participating in Dual Enrollment and Move on When Ready, two programs that allow and encourage students to take college level classes while still in high school. The next three principals who gave their approval lead schools in two different counties. These principals serve in the three schools in which I had originally planned to conduct interviews.

The high schools represented, using names that have been changed, are diverse in terms of urbanicity, student body size, student body demographics, and performance in terms of student achievement measured by state level assessments. Briarcreek High School is in the top ten percent of high schools in a Southeastern state, based on test scores. The school serves approximately 1700 students, and the student population is 70% white, 14% African-American, 9% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 4% other. Briarcreek High is different from the other two because of its Asian population and because the school has only 17% of the student population who are eligible for free or reduced lunch. It is also considered a higher performing school than the other two with whom I worked. It is located in an urban community.

Cedar River High School is in the same county as Briarcreek. While Briarcreek is in an urban area, Cedar River is in a rural area. The school has approximately 700 students, and the student population is 73% white, 19% African-American, 5% dual, 2% Hispanic, and 1% other.

The student population eligible for free or reduced lunch is 43%. As the single high school in a town, the school has widespread community support. This school has higher poverty rates, is rural with urban exposure, and is often the lowest performing high school in the county.

The third high school is Edward Maxwell High School, which is the only high school in the county where it is located. The school approximately 1200 students, and the student population is 48% African-American, 45% white, 4% Hispanic, 2% multi-racial, and 2% other. The percentage of the student population who qualify to receive free or reduced lunch is 68%. This school is currently low-performing according to state testing. I chose the school because of its higher African-American population.

### **Participants**

After receiving permission from the principals, I contacted the teachers; met with them to give them the flyers, the parental informed consent forms and the student assent forms; and arranged to contact them again in three days. The teachers were happy to participate, but they were not sure that students would want to give their time to interview for an hour. The teachers understood their students well. Few students returned the parental consent and student assent forms, so the selection process became more of an acceptance of almost all who wanted to participate, which turned out to be nine students across three high schools. Only logistical reasons prevented three students from participating. On one day when I went for an interview, the classroom teacher was absent. The substitute did not know who was to be interviewed and did not have access to the signed forms. On another day, the student forgot to come to the interview after school. His mother was willing to return him to school for the interview, but the school had to be closed by a specific time. The interview could not be rescheduled. Another student was going to interview at a specific time during the day, but another teacher had taken

him a test to complete since he had been absent earlier in the week. It was the last opportunity he had to do the test. We agreed it was best for him to not receive a zero on a summative assessment. The problems with arranging a time to conduct interviews in the timeframe we had is indicative of the packed schedules many gifted students work through each day. Forgetfulness can be a problem with gifted students when their focus is on one task they want to complete. The gifted student who forgot the interview had just been given an assignment that he was ready to begin. He was apologetic, and through his comments and comments shared by his mother, we realized that he was much more worried about disappointing his English teacher than about forgetting the interview.

Of the nine students who chose to participate and could participate, six are female, and three are male. Half (3) of the females are of European descent, one is of African-American descent, one is of Egyptian descent, and one is of Asian descent. Two of the boys are of European descent, and one is of Chinese descent. All of the students are 15, 16, or 17 years of age. The official grade they are in is misleading because all of the students are taking classes either beyond the normal grade level or in college as well as taking classes in their high schools. All of the students are identified as gifted and currently are taking Advanced Placement English classes or honors English classes. The students may be dual enrolled, but they are not taking English at the college level this year.

The intent of this research was not to measure differences of opinion among students of different high schools, in different grades, in schools of different descriptions of success or failure, to discover the influence of poverty on the opinions of the students, or to evaluate cultural influences on student perspectives concerning their English classes. The selection of

different schools with different demographics was simply an effort to gather a variety of opinions and perspectives from students with different backgrounds, circumstances, and teachers.

A name was assigned to each student with a brief description of the student that included gender, but the name was not matched to the school or the student's specific age, culture, heritage, religion, race, teacher, or the specific class being discussed. Classes were discussed in terms of whether they are honors, Advanced Placement, gifted, regular education English classes, or non-English classes. A primary goal was to protect the anonymity of the students who so honestly shared their opinions. What was indicated were the comments given by a student, and from a student's collective comments, a personality will be discernable — not an identity.

### **Student Profiles**

Amy is a female student of Asian descent. She is a leader in her school. She is dual-enrolled in high school classes and in classes in a university close enough to her home to allow her to attend classes and still live at home. Her passions are statistics and science.

Kate is a female student who is dual-enrolled in both high school classes and classes at a university close enough to her home to allow her to attend classes and still live at home. She is athletic and enjoys volunteering her time to help others. She started taking high school classes when she was in the eighth grade. She loves to read, and she wants to be an English teacher.

Jessica is a female student who was identified as being gifted in the sixth grade. She is generally taking classes with students who are one or two years older than is she. She is an athlete who plays two varsity sports. Her goal is to become a psychiatrist.

Stephen is a male who enjoys being a gifted student. His passion is computer technology, though he enjoys studying philosophy.

Susan is a female who is passionate about music and teaching. She believes that she is true to herself in all that she does. She tries to be true to her faith.

Courtney is a female who claims as her passion all of the sciences, but she particularly enjoys biology. She plans to become a doctor. She has considered research but wants to more directly work with and help others through practice.

Blake is a male who plans to be a computer engineer. His goal is to find happiness and be successful enough to take care of a family someday. His passion is music, and he currently plays six instruments.

Jake is a male who enjoys noting the effects movies and novels have on people and then analyzing what is in the text that creates the noted effects. He does not believe he has yet found his passion, but he knows he enjoys analyzing what already exists.

Holly is a female who plans to be a math teacher. Teaching is her passion, and she enjoys watching teachers work and analyzing why they are successful when they are successful. She feels she now has a group of friends who she can trust.

## **Procedure**

Almost all of the students who returned parental and student permission forms participated in interviews unless the interviews were unable to logistically take place in terms of scheduling. All interviews took place either during or just after school, in a classroom, conference room, or media study room. They lasted in length from 48 minutes to one hour and 18 minutes. The debriefing form created specifically for students participating in the interviews at each particular high school was made available to them.

After the interviews were recorded, they were transcribed. Transcribed interviews ranged from 7643 words to 12,031 words in length. After the interviews were transcribed, they were



coded. The interview questions were grouped into five major areas, as shown in Appendix A. The first set of questions focused on characteristics of self, followed by questions involving characteristics of classmates. The third grouping of questions explored characteristics of activities and strategies, and the next group led the student to discuss characteristics of the teacher. The last grouping of questions asked students to think of past classes, dream of future classes, and evaluate present classes based on knowledge of the past and possibilities in the future. In no interview were all of the prepared questions asked, were questions asked precisely in the order they were organized, or were there not follow up questions seeking clarification and understanding. The major themes, then, were not neatly grouped in five clear areas of the interview. New themes emerged, in part, as a result of the decision to allow the interviews to be more conversational and comfortable for students. The fluidity of student thought was honored when possible, but not to the degree that a student was encouraged to ramble or I allowed the interview to stray off-topic.

The five initial themes were coded in addition to the others. Comments the student made about himself or herself were coded SF. Positive comments were followed by a p, and negative comments were followed by an n. Comments about peers were coded PR. Comments about the classroom were coded C. Comments about activities and strategies were coded AS, and comments about teachers were coded TE. Any comment directly concerning being gifted was coded with a GC. Any comment about other students, classrooms, or teachers was coded with an O followed by the appropriate theme code. Learning styles were coded with LS. Comments about grades were coded GR, about communication were coded CO, about perceptions were coded PV, about social media were coded SM, about classroom discussion were coded CD, and about assessments were coded AT. All of the comments were coded within these themes and

categories. Most comments were either recognizably positive or negative. Repeated commonalities among gifted students were noted as were strong differences.

### **Thematic Findings**

#### **Characteristics of Self**

Following the theme of self-characterization, the nine students all expressed opinions about their personalities and how they learn. Four of the students used description indicating that they are both quiet people and quiet learners. Courtney feels that she is on the “introverted side,” is “pretty chill,” is “not a loud person,” and is “analytical,” “a thinker,” and a perfectionist. She “loves to learn.” As a thinker, Courtney sees herself “middle of the road,” and her explanation of that phrase does not mean average. She simply means that, “if there’s an argument, and there are two sides,” she “typically, generally sees in the middle.” Time constraints are all that make her put one task ahead of another or not do her best. She reports that lack of time to do excellent and complete work is what causes most of her stress. She only allows herself not doing her best work when the time required to do an assignment greatly outweighs the learning outcome or the importance of the grade. Being really tired shuts her down.

Jessica admits that she is moody, and while sometimes she can be motivated by a reward or by the idea of meeting a goal, most of the time, she explains, how hard she works, “depends on what mood I am.” She adds, “I will wake up, and sometimes I wake up happy. Sometimes I wake up not too happy.” When asked what changes her mood, she responds, “...if the teacher is not in a good mood, like I walk in and she...is like already fussing at us, then I’m like ‘gosh, shut me off, and I am not going to work for you. You are already fussing before the class even gets started.’” Jessica also explains that she likes to work in a quiet classroom, and a classroom that is noisy makes her think, “Okay, I’m not about to do this.” She is particularly unhappy with

a situation where “people are talking, even though they are supposed to be working, even though it is supposed to be a silent time.”

Holly also describes herself as moody, and says, “. . .if I am in like a bad mood that day, I’m just done with everything, and I don’t try as hard.” She is careful, though, not to allow her moods to cause trouble for others; she does work that affects a group of students. When talking about her learning style, Holly explains, “I really like visuals and learning that way, but I also like having worksheets because I like reading and seeing that’s how you do it. I like a lot of order in my life as a whole, and if I have [a teacher] who is constantly talking, talking, I am just like, ‘Wait. I need to have something written down.’” She adds, “Really, it depends on the class. Mainly in math I need a worksheet, ‘cause you can’t just do a problem on the board and expect someone to learn it automatically.”

Jessica describes what being a deep thinker is like for her, saying, “I think deeper about just everything. Say a situation happened. My brain would literally break it down to like pieces to see why this happened, what can I do to not make this happen again. It just breaks it down. It’s like I over think.”

Susan says that there is never a time when she does not try to do her best. “It never happens,” she says. Kate also says that she always tries to do her best because, she explains, “stress build up about that class or like athletically.” She finds it easier to consistently give her best effort. Kate shares her opinions of school, saying, “I have always loved school, the learning part. I like school because I get to learn new things.” She adds, “I don’t really like it kid wise. The environment is not always good for a person’s self-esteem. In the teenage years you are trying to find yourself.”

Kate also explains that she “likes hands on learning, moving, like [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] ADHD type stuff.” She further explains, saying, “It’s hard to learn when the teacher is like, ‘here’s a paper, silent work, let’s write and have your own personal time.’ I find that hard as a gifted person because our brain is going, going, going, so we want to move.” For Kate, concentrating is difficult when doing “independent, non-interactive, no talking kind of work.” In terms of learning style, Susan likes to learn, “more by doing stuff...like projects and really having to research the information. She uses flashcards to study, and she says, “People say that is so nerdy.”

Blake feels that he has good opinions that people could value if they hear him. He learns best when his music is playing. He feels he is the second or tied for second as smartest person in his gifted classes. He puts filters on what he says because he does not want to be so honest that he hurts people’s feelings. Jessica describes herself as both a moody person and a moody learner. She also explained that she is funny, but sometimes people cannot put being smart and funny together. She believes that few people understand her or her personality. Jessica likes to learn in a quiet classroom.

Holly is reluctant to ask questions in classrooms where she is not among gifted friends. She is shy, but she sees improvement in that area since beginning high school and being in advanced classes with other gifted students. She views most gifted students as being confident and loud.

Jake sees himself as being an “over-achiever,” and to him this concept means that he is not happy with doing just what is required to get a B or an A. He wants to go beyond the requirements listed on the rubric. Stephen says that he is a “STEM kind of person,” and he enjoys technology, math, and science. He also uses “over-achiever” in his description of himself.

He explained that he likes to do more than is expected and tends to “really get into” what he is doing. He likes to “have fun...and let...creative juices flow.”

Amy feels she is self-motivated. She asks questions and is not afraid if the question sounds silly. She feels that she freely and often expresses her opinions in class. She strives to be friendly and approachable. She has the “personal drive and motivation without having someone always pushing” her to succeed. She really enjoys school and tries to do her “very best” in just about everything she does in school.

Jessica is another student interviewed who describes herself as having ADHD. She expounds, “It’s hard for me to focus, really, like when I read...it’s hard, but the gifted part steps in to where I don’t really have to pay as much attention.” When listening to an educator teaching, she says “it just comes to me” without her having to be focused. She feels that being gifted helps her with being ADHD. When considering what life would be like without ADHD, she said, “Whoo! I would be probably the top of my class because I believe I am smart, but the ADHD sometimes gets in the way.”

One way Jessica copes with ADHD is to doodle. Kate, the previously mentioned student who also reported struggling with ADHD doodles, and she also “counts stuff” when she is bored. She says that a lot of her gifted classmates doodle. She also copes with ADHD by swinging her legs. Kate feels that reading is good because at least her eyes are moving. One of Kate’s friends clicks a pen, but he has found one that he loves that does not make a sound when it clicks. Kate also has a pen that clicks at the top to open and at the bottom to close. She says that she can “click the bottom as much as you want without making a noise.”

The visual they use to describe the ways they learn and their personalities is the place where they sit in the classroom. Courtney was very clear that though she was not outspoken in

the classroom, she likes to sit in the front of the class and be involved in learning. Amy sits in the front of the classroom when the desks are organized in rows because sitting in the back makes her feel anxious. She would rather sit in a semicircle. Several students mentioned that they like to sit where they can see everyone else's faces so they read their expressions. Amy's preference for sitting in a semicircle is so that she can watch other students when they are talking. Blake mentioned liking working in groups to see faces. When choosing a seat in the classroom, Jessica likes best to sit on the side of the classroom or toward the back. When people are talking, though, she shifts around to make sure she can see their faces. She puts their expressions with their words and thinks the truth of what a person says can be evaluated by how a person looks when he or she speaks. Jessica does not like to sit in a circle or a semicircle; she feels as if too many people can see her. Kate likes to sit, "front and center in the hot seat," and she chooses that seat even in her college classrooms.

The students discussed participating in self-coaching, self-cheerleading, and self-direction. Kate believes in working to uplift herself in learning situations. She believes that if she can get the right attitude that she can learn. Stephen pushes himself to turn an assignment into a "fun little project." One of these "little projects" he designed included creating "this virtual kind of space...using web-site elements," and creating a "tour of the book."

Jake explains, "I like to set high ambitions...and will do everything I think about, but I think about a lot of things." As an example, he offers, "I want to learn that language or learn how to do that program." He continues, "Once I get around to it, I try my best to be really good at it. That is how I see myself. Once I start pushing myself at something, I'll go and do it the best that I can."

Jessica says, “When I work out a problem I’ll talk through the problem to myself.”

Courtney sees that she helps herself by being analytical, logical, and thinking through a situation. She does not like to make decisions without time to think.

All of the students discussed the importance of grades. Amy, Blake, Courtney, Jake, Stephen, Susan, Kate, Holly, and Jessica all see good grades as a requirement that must be met to take the next steps in meeting their goals. All of them plan to go to college. Kate specifically mentioned the Hope Scholarship and the Zell Miller Scholarship as possibly paying for her undergraduate degree and determining where she would attend college. She is already planning where she will apply for graduate school since she knows that she will have to pay for that herself and does not have to attend an in-state school. Kate is grounded if she makes less than an 85, but that is rarely a problem because she says, “I ground myself” before I get to the point where my parents would ground me. If her grades drop, she works hard until she has them high again. Holly discussed making lower grades (below an 85) for the first time in AP Biology and thinking to herself that the work was harder and she needed to work harder.

Blake and Jessica both indicated that they were not particularly upset by grades that were not A’s as long as they could still earn a high grade in the class by doing well on tests and major projects. Neither of them were fans of doing homework because it seemed to have no value, to their grades or as a contribution to their understanding. Susan and Amy do their best and expect to make between 95 and 100 in most classes. Jake does well with little effort in all classes. Stephen likes high grades, and so he earns them. Jessica shares that “as long as I am passing, I’m okay.” She expounds, “If I have an 80, I’m good. If I have a 90, I’m excited. If I have a 100, that’s awesome, but, yeah, as long as I am passing, I’m okay.” She is “thinking of going into the military so they would pay for my school.”

Only Kate shares that her parents have set a specific lower limits on her grades. The rest of the students want to please their parents, so they keep their grades at whatever level they perceive makes their parents comfortable. They share that their parents have helped them to see that the goals they have should be those that are satisfying to them as gifted and capable students. Some of the students expressed particularly wanting to make one parent or another happy, or to please someone else in the family. Kate wants her mom and her grandparents, especially her gifted grandfather to be proud of her. She wants them to be proud not only because she will earn her diploma, but she wants them to understand that she gained the diploma using her “best capability.” Blake wants to please his grandparents because he says he has good grandparents. Amy sighs hugely when she says that grades are important to her and adds, “Very much so.” She also feels that among the gifted “class rank is a huge thing that makes people uptight about it.” She says that when class rank and grades become so important that “people stop learning because they just try to memorize everything so that they can get their class rank up.” She continues, “Numbers have become a huge part of all of our lives, and I think the funny thing is...colleges are now looking for students who are well-rounded and can be social. It’s like both ends of the spectrum are shooting up, but the balance is so hard to achieve. Teachers...tell us to relax and...enjoy life as a teenager, but at the same time they’ll just pile us up with...busy work.” Amy adds, “The numbers part has gotten to be such a big issue, that there is a huge cheating issue that’s been going on, and teachers are catching on. They are revising their tests from period to period, but...just the other day, I am pretty sure that someone took a picture of a teacher’s key...it was passed around period to period, and then the periods at the end of the day got higher grades than the period at the beginning of the day. I find that so terrible.” She



concludes, “Grades are important but it’s not as important as what you actually get in your mind by the time you walk out.”

Holly, too, believes that grades “have taken away from the education” and “put even more pressure on kids.” She says that she “likes to get that good grade, but, now, sometimes, it is all about the grade and not about the learning.” Holly says that one of her classes last year “really showed me that it is going to get harder, that I am not always going to get the good grades and don’t need to stress out about it too much, but you still need to stress a little bit so you try to get the higher grades, but just don’t further enforce that mindset.” Susan believes that grades are extremely important and says, “if I get a bad grade, I cry.”

Themes that were revealed through coding the comments of the nine gifted students about their personalities as learners show that among gifted students there is diversity and a need for differentiation in the classroom, even when the class itself is a clear attempt to diversify learning for the gifted. Some gifted students acknowledge that they are moody. Teachers can affect that moodiness by making it better through challenging assignments, participation in the learning process, and a happy attitude. They can make it worse through conditions that are just the opposite: low-level and low-interest work, assigning and not teaching, and prolonged fussing at students who are not doing what they should. Most gifted students attempt to do their best work, even when their best is more than the required level of work needed to make a perfect grade. The implication here is two-fold. Gifted students may work to their own high standards, and teachers may not be assigning work that requires the rigor gifted students can meet.

Gifted students do not generally feel that their non-gifted peers have an accurate perception of who they are as people. They think others do not recognize their abilities as individuals to add interesting insights to a casual conversation, to be funny and to tease, or to

offer good advice and to keep personal shared information. They yearn for friendship, but they do not believe that others see them as potential friends.

Gifted students often cope with their personal challenges, particularly when in the classroom. Those who are diagnosed with ADHD have strategies they use successfully. They also are perceptive when they see others using coping strategies. They may turn dull assignments into projects by adding their own goals, creativity, and talents to redesign the product. They may shut down and withdraw from a negative learning situation rather than to continue to engage to their own detriment, which may include feeling frustrated with other students or the teacher, feeling despair at the waste of time and lack of learning, or feeling separated from non-gifted peers who have no interest in learning or allowing learning to take place. They may read or sleep when they decide to withdraw from the classroom situation.

Almost all of the nine gifted students directly commented on needing or wanting to see the teacher's expressions when he or she is talking or teaching and the expressions of classmates when the classmates are speaking. They use expressions to more deeply analyze the quality, content, and intent of the comments they are hearing. This need to view expressions is balanced with the student's classroom personality which drives where the gifted choose to be seated. They have clear preferences for seating based on their intended level and type of participation in the class. Those who like to sit to the side and speak only occasionally still want to see everyone else when they speak. Those who like learning in groups like pod seating because they can see the expressions of others in the group. Those who love to talk and be seen most enjoy sitting in the front or in a semicircle. Three students expressed great unhappiness and stress at having to sit where they can be seen too much or where they are too obviously separated from the learning and action taking place in the classroom.

Grades are an issue with gifted students because grades are the ticket to the greater learning they want to experience in the future. They have little patience and express anger toward anyone, teachers or other students, who contribute to a situation that in any way jeopardizes their grades. Most of them want high grades, and will question any point taken away from them in an assessment. Some have lower standards, but they want to meet whatever level they have set as being acceptable. Of the nine, one student is not as worried about grades because she believes she will score extremely well on the test she needs to both gain entrance into the military and choose her career path once she is there. Grades cause angst among the gifted because they may be points of conflict between them and non-gifted students in the same classroom. The gifted feel both the high expectations from others and the misunderstanding that comes from those who are not gifted and do not understand the gifted. The gifted are addressed as cheaters by some because of how easily and quickly they may learn. They are called nerds because their grades are consistently high and they care enough about grades to challenge a teacher. They may negate a curve on a test and illicit the ire of other students. Grades create conflict between those who are gifted and those who are not when all share the same classroom.

The gifted students interviewed are often their own cheerleaders and coaches. When they face learning or performance situations, they offer mental talks to self and silent verbal step-by-step coaching through the situations. The coaching is a way to focus, move smoothly through the task, and to offer calming encouragement; the cheerleading is a way to hear positive, supportive, and confidence-building statements.

### **Characteristic of Classmates**

Stephen believes that he is “an integral part of the little micro-community we have among the gifted students. What is important is that we are part of this group.” Jake believes that being

accepted and being friends are different. He feels that “we understand we are all in the class...we obviously are all smart to some degree,” and there is acceptance among the gifted because of that situation.

Jessica says that when others meet her, she wants them to see her in the same way they see [names of two gifted girls in her classes].” She does not believe that people view her in that positive way because, she explains, “I play. I am very playful, energetic, and when I meet new people...I am kind of nervous...kind of jittery when I talk.”

Susan thinks that gifted kids are different from each other in a lot of ways. She explains, “Some are going to want to talk. Talking can play many roles, like discussion, debate, if you are supposed to talk, talk. If you are not supposed to talk, don’t. Some people, maybe in some way, talking is a part of their giftedness.” She further explains, “Every gifted student has a different way of learning. There are gifted types of gifted students, and people need to consider that. Teachers need to consider that. All students don’t learn one way. All students don’t learn by reading notes. Some students learn by doing. Some students do both. It just depends on the learning style of the student.”

Courtney feels that being gifted means dealing with the stereotypes that other students have about the gifted. The stereotypes are that gifted kids “always know everything,” and she adds, “I don’t know where they get that from.” That gifted kids are seen as being “very nerdy” is another stereotype. Other students believe that gifted kids “typically don’t do a lot of fun things,” and that they are “always studying.” She laughs about the always studying stereotype because she believes that gifted students do not generally study more or maybe they study less than other students. She believes that at school she is known as “one of the gifted kids” and that they are seen as a group of, “I don’t want to say a clique.”

Courtney says that there is “big variety” in the way her gifted classmates like to learn. She says she sees “both sides.” She describes the first group as being “more quiet.” She gives the example that, “if there is a discussion going on, they’re engaging in their heads. They have a lot of ideas. I think, I personally think, the quiet people have the most ideas.” The other people are “very loud, very vocal. They like to express their opinions. They’re not embarrassed. They just put themselves out there.” Courtney then adds, “We are all just kids; we’re all in high school. There’s like someone with every personality.” She concludes, “The gifted classroom-I don’t think it really changes the type of kids.”

Kate also feels that there are layers of giftedness in her gifted classes. She explains, “Some are very slightly gifted, and some of us are way above and beyond. Some students are just in there for AP, and not for the gifted part, and they get mad because in some cases, we do not have to work as hard as they do to be in that class. They call us dumb because we are not working and are getting the same grade as they have. They feel like we cheat.” When saying they do not cheat, she clarifies, “It is just in my brain. I could read something, especially with numbers. I don’t like math, but I am good with numbers, and remember it. I can hear a person’s locker combination one time and tell them what it is two months later when they have forgotten it. I could have heard it for one second, one time, and it is in my brain.”

Amy feels that her comments are respected by her gifted classmates and that she also values what they say. She feels that hearing her classmates’ views and opinions help to broaden her perspective.

Jessica shares, “One thing I have noticed since I was in sixth grade, the first time they placed me in a gifted class is that all we do is talk. Like every class, every teacher that I ever had

said that our main problem is talking...and now we get into high school, our talking is kind of related to lessons, but we are still talking.”

When referring to her gifted classmates, Courtney feels that they understand what each person is good at doing. When any one of them needs help, the person knows who is likely to be most capable of helping. She agrees that she knows the person to ask for help in chemistry, in writing an essay, or with relationships. She does not know the identified areas of giftedness for all of her gifted classmates, but she does feel she knows their strengths. She acknowledges, too, that she knows gifted people in her English class who struggle with English. She describes these students as being “those who are very, very science and math based and their brains are just like shooting numbers and everything, but literature is definitely not their forte.” She also knows gifted students who are gifted in literature but struggle in math. Blake believes that he can recognize different ability levels, even among the gifted. He believes that guys are not smarter than girls.

Jessica feels that being gifted helps her learn more easily than other learn who are not gifted. She states, “I know of incidences where [the teacher] will be teaching, and I will get it, and my other classmates will be like, ‘What? What is that? I don’t understand’.” She continues, “I already have it. I just sit there, and I don’t really pay attention, but I just listen.” She later adds, “I know some people can be talking and still do their work...but there are two people who, we all learn the same, but they actually go to sleep in class, but then make 100 on the test. I make 100, too, but I don’t go to sleep! The three of us...don’t really like doing classwork. I feel, okay, I can miss this classwork grade since it is a small grade and make it up with a test grade...if I really think I know that subject, I ain’t about to do a paper [laughing]. When the test comes

around, I really get on it and do the test and make an A on it. I don't know how, but they will get passing grades, too."

When talking about her gifted classmates, Jessica says, "The gifted are alright. When I first took my test and was labeled as gifted, they accepted me, especially [one gifted female classmate]. She was like, 'Oh, congratulations' and every day she would speak to me. We usually didn't talk before then, so I made a lot of friends when that happened." She says that she likes to be in classes with other gifted students because she "likes talking to them." She feels as if they are accepting of her. She likes to have community and collegiality in her classes, but says that she does not have that in her "mixed classes."

Susan believes that students who are not gifted can be seen as lazy, "not that they are lazy because they aren't gifted, but if they are used to taking a regular class instead of a gifted class, cause we have some of those students this year, they don't have the same work ethic. It would be easier if there was a class of [only] gifted, and we could go at our own pace and get a lot done."

When coding comments about classmates, several themes emerged. Gifted students need other gifted students. They feel as if only another gifted person can understand the challenge of being correctly viewed as being different, the sometimes uncomfortable drive to learn, the need to prove that the perceived intelligence is a reality, and the stress of having to cope with distractions from learning and accusations of unfairness from those who are not gifted. Teachers who are not gifted or who have not been trained to work with the gifted are another shared trial. They also need other gifted students to support their own learning. They know they may not be gifted in all academic areas, and they work on a bartering system with other gifted students. One may be linguistically gifted and be expected to spend time teaching a gifted peer who struggles in English, but who thrives in physics. The student who is gifted in physics may be expected to

spend time tutoring another gifted student who struggles in physics, but who is a technology guru. The students form learning communities where each person teaches to his or her academic strengths and fully expects to be taught in the areas where there are weaknesses. This community is one way gifted students bypass weak teachers and disruptive classrooms. The student who is teaching may well be teaching beyond the curriculum as it is defined by the teacher.

Gifted students seem to feel enormous relief when they reach high school and can take all or almost all advanced classes with other advanced and gifted students. They feel they have been severely underserved in both elementary and middle school programs where both conditions of both advanced content and able peers are not met throughout the day. The students who were interviewed could be called gifted survivors. They did not abandon the gifted ship when there was no wind in the sails. They stayed on board and finally set sail. Other students who were not interviewed may not have found the relief of finding a gifted peer group and enjoying advanced classes. Those students who removed themselves from the gifted program or who refused to be tested because it meant isolation and harder work would not be the students interviewed in this study.

Gifted students adjust the complexity of their conversations and discussions to match the perceived ability levels of the people with whom they are talking. They add extra explanation to what they are saying and edit out comments they feel will not be understood. The penalty of sounding nerdy or smart is high. Other students remove themselves from the conversation if it is too advanced, and they may not leave quietly. They may point out how different the gifted students are in ways that are not “normal.” Even within the gifted population, there is adjustment in conversational depth. Students who are super or highly gifted temper their comments for those who are borderline or moderately gifted. Gifted students feel that they know both the level of



giftedness of their gifted peer and the area in which each is gifted. Based on my experiences as a teacher of the gifted and as someone who teaches teachers how to teach the gifted, this perception of level of giftedness and area of giftedness is not shared by teachers. Teachers often comment that they know only that a student is gifted and may not realize for several months that a gifted student actually struggles in the content area taught by the teacher.

Even the quieter gifted students described their gifted peers as being talkative, energetic, and even loud. Energetic was generally a term used to express learning involvement as opposed to big movements; however, the students all talked about the movement associated with hyperactivity and a lively mind as being present in many gifted students. They felt that the learning energy they exhibit is one reason why substitutes and “regular” education teachers do not enjoy teaching them.

### **Characteristics of Activities and Strategies**

The gifted students expressed their dislike of busy work. Amy says that when assigned “busy work that is not actually helping me...I just kind of absent-mindedly do it.” She clarifies that “it’s not that I have an issue with work.” She continues, “it’s busy work that I have an issue with. I think that’s a huge problem that teachers will print out packets that they find on-line. And the ridiculous part is that the answers are also on-line, so the students just copy the answers...and get a one hundred completion grade. You learn nothing. It is just so awful.” Kate does not like busy work or being given assignments that include learning that has already taken place. She gives as examples work done with “prefixes and suffixes” and “vocabulary work” that is not learned from reading a book. She says of words learned in “vocabulary lessons” that she is “going to memorize them and brain dump them.” She adds, “it’s just an easy 100, and we get irritated with it.”

Blake likes to present what he has learned. He believes he can learn from other people and what they have to share about their completed projects.

Jake describes himself as a “focused, narrow person” and if he has “a problem where if something bothers him about a project, “his reaction is to decide not to “put my all in to it.” If he likes the project then he will “probably be the best in the class at doing that project.”

Jessica believes that a teacher has to adjust the classroom situation for all students. The challenge of allowing kids who enjoy a relaxed atmosphere with talking, movement, and unstructured questioning while meeting the needs of those students who prefer a quiet place to work can be solved by allowing headphones or “writing a pass for the media center” and letting students work there.

Courtney likes classroom discussions. She likes the ones best that sound like natural conversations. For her it is “easier to turn...thoughts into something,” if she does not have to wait to be acknowledged to speak. When a teacher gives a student the floor to speak, the pressure is greater, the attention of the class and teacher is more focused, and, as Courtney explains, “it’s...on you” to come up with an acceptable comment. Courtney’s favorite aspect of her English classes is when class discussions relate real problems people face in life with the book that is being read and discussed. She feels that “there always needs to be connections” and discussions are one of the “best ways to have that kind of education.” Blake enjoys classroom conversations “very much.” He likes to discuss topics that pertain to government. He considers that “looking at the pros and cons is important...not to just look at one side of the story but to see it from another side’s point of view.” He believes that the opinions of others matter, too. He explains, “They matter just as much as mine. I believe that I should be able to concede some of [my opinions], if

they are able to concede some of theirs.” He says that he has never been taught how to have an academic conversation.

Jessica likes classroom discussions better than any other activity she does in her classes. She likes answering questions such as, “What do you feel ...or how do ya’ll feel?” about a topic. She believes that in those circumstances, she can “be pretty honest. I can say what I feel is right, what I feel, my opinion.” She adds that she feels she can defend her opinion and her thinking to others. Holly likes “classes like in language arts and literature where it is good to have class discussions instead of having to write it out.” “Still,” she explains, “it is hard to transfer what you think into what you say. Still, I feel if you are just having to share your opinion verbally, it is not as much pressure as having to write it out.”

Amy likes to discuss controversial topics because “it’s good for everybody to be exposed to people who have different opinions and different outlooks than they have. When we all get older, no one is going to hold us by the hand, and we are going to be exposed to many things that had we not been exposed in high school, we would not react in an appropriate way.” She adds that she tries to “make sure to be open-minded” when she is in a discussion, and “after I try to be open-minded, it always works. Things that people say...really do have a pretty profound impact on me, but then again, I try not to let everything enter my mind because my parents raised me to have my own stance and to know what I believe is right and what is not.” She also feels that classroom discussion is not worthwhile if the teacher only allows discussion of “safe topics.” She explains, “We’ve heard it so [great emphasis] many times throughout the years that it gets boring. We already know where the conversation is going, just because we’ve already had it. That’s when you kind of zone out.”

Holly says, “We did non-verbal conversations [in my English class], and those are really interesting because you would have people running up to the board and fighting for a marker to write something, and it was really entertaining.” She continues, “You could see the thought process without having so many people yelling at one time.”

Amy feels that being safe in a classroom is dependent on both classmates and the teacher. It involves being able to express an opinion and “being aware that judgment will come, but it’s accepting judgment.” She also believes that students have to “be educated” before they can have a conversation that feels safe for themselves and for others. Amy believes “a huge part of English class is the discussions that you have—about books you read, or anything, your research that you did” She thinks, “it is very important that the teacher allows feedback from the students and that we discuss as a whole rather than the teacher just lecturing the whole time.” She also believes that discussions should have time to develop and the time should be “uninterrupted time” and everyone has to “be listening and not doing their homework” while it is taking place. She believes that a discussion cannot be interrupted because when the time comes to begin the discussion again it is almost impossible to the same topic with the same intensity.

Jake says that he comes to school because he likes to see what “we are going to learn next in class, like even it’s in AP Literature, and we are reading King Arthur (spoken in an affected droll and bored voice), I really want to know what everyone else’s take on the book might be. In AP Language Arts, we had this thing where we would sit in like two circles, and we would discuss the book, but it was in a way where the outer circle was only allowed to ask questions, and the inside circle was only allowed to discuss the book, so it was really interesting because we did it for two days for most books, so it was really funny watching your question being answered without you being able to have any input on it.” He was not, however, as fond of being in the

inner circle and “having to answer random questions . . .that you have never even thought about, then ten people sitting there going ‘ahhhhh’, and then after five minutes there is an actual discussion.” He also spoke of another variation of the Fishbowl, Inside Out, or the Socratic Circle that happened in his honors English class. “We did Socratic Seminars in a way . . .where the whole point of it was, you tried not to contradict someone directly and more of tried to direct the conversation in another way, as to get answers.” He enjoys hearing interesting facts in his Physics class and says, “The little interesting stuff that we learn from each class is what drives me.”

Courtney likes how English teachers “require us to read some books.” She explains, “I know I would never read them on my own.” She does wish, though, that had some choice is some of the books that are read as a class. When asked what three books she would choose she offered, “I don’t know if it’s childish, but I’ve always loved Harry Potter.” She continues, “In my freshman year, my summer assignment I had to read *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2005), and it is one of my all-time favorite books. I could read it over and over again. It is so well-written.” Her third book that she would choose is, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). She explains, “Those books combine-you can enjoy them but they also have a lot of meaning in them.” She likes “how we can correlate a lot of the things we read in English to real world problems or ideas.”

Amy would like to pick the books she wants to read because, “I know for a fact that I am a very picky person when it comes to literature,” but she also says, “I think that fact that teachers pick it forces me to have a broader perspective.” She feels that she is “almost grateful” to teachers for picking out books because she probably would not push herself to read the books they choose. If she could choose her own books, she would read, “all fiction books, probably some scientific articles (which she points out is non-fiction), but . . .not Shakespeare.” She

comments that she just read *The Scarlet Letter*, and she would not have read it without it being an assignment. She realizes it is “beautiful... but it was a drag to read because it was so wordy.” She is grateful it was chosen by her teacher because she would “have grown up without reading something like that.”

Blake says about reading, “I make sure that I understand the material and as long as it takes me then I keep on reading it until I understand what I am reading.” He continues, “I don’t go through it real quick and act like I read it.” He said that he never researches a book on-line to supplement or replace his reading of the book. Jessica thinks that reading in English classes is not necessary. She has the tools she needs to read and says, “I have the vocabulary and the grammar...so I just use that if I need to read something.”

Jake is not a fan of writing if the topic requires his opinions or conclusions about a topic. He says, “I really hate writing essays where I have to put my argument.” He does not like a prompt that asks, “What do you feel about this subject?” He describes his reaction as, “I have never thought about that subject, and frankly I don’t care.” He would rather be given an assignment that instructs him to complete a project where there are “this many pages” and the student is to “put this, and this, and this into” it. This project he says he can complete in “half an hour,” but an “essay will take me like with procrastination, probably the rest of the afternoon.”

Jessica says that writing to her is not important because, she continues, “You’ve got a recorder. Why can’t we just record our essays? We don’t have to write them. When I talk, I try to sound smart, so the grammar and vocabulary, that’s important to me.” Her absolute least favorite activity is “to read this passage and then write a story over it.” She adds, “No, that’s two things I already don’t like to do combined.”

Amy says, “I don’t like the whole standard five paragraph essay.” She adds, “It is just so constricted that your creativity is hindered.” She also does not like outlines or rubrics. Amy explains, “Teachers have to have a way of grading, and ...grades are very important to a lot of the gifted students. I mean we only feel comfortable with a rubric, but if I were to put aside grades, I think [rubrics] are a huge constrictor of what we can do.” Blake does not really like to write, and states that in English “other than writing, there is not really much that I don’t like to do.” He says that writing is “tiring.”

Susan says “I love to write, write an essay. It doesn’t matter if [the teacher] gives you something to write or they say, ‘pick a topic.’” She continues, “What I have trouble with ...if I write an essay, it is going to be full out. It might be six pages. Condensing it...I want to put every one of my thoughts in that paper. I love to write. I love to write and express my opinions.”

Courtney is not a fan of grammar. She does not mind writing essays, but does not like a writing assignment where the teacher stresses the technical, grammatical aspects of writing. She says that she uses spell check because she is not a good speller, and she also confesses that her “sentence structure may not be like 100% when you get down to the nit-picky details.”

Holly confesses, “I get nervous a lot. It’s been better now because I was in elementary school and my voice would shoot up two octaves because I would be scared to talk even on the last day of school, but it’s a lot better now because of the friends I surround myself with and my teachers who are like, ‘Okay, you know this, you can do this, now do the best you can.’ So that really helped me with my confidence.”

Amy does not like to work in groups unless she is in a gifted class because “when it’s not with gifted people that one person ends up doing all the work.” When she is in a gifted class, she feels that “people pull their weight more.” She also has noticed that she is not likely to give her

opinion about the direction the project takes if she thinks it will hurt someone else's feelings. She views group work as an assignment that will be over in a few days. She says that, "a lot of times in gifted classrooms everyone is a leader, so everyone just butts heads. No one wants to back down." Blake thinks that working in groups "is alright as long as the people are the same caliber of person as [I] am." He explains, "It should be that the groups should be equally divided where not one person is doing the work."

Jessica enjoys group work. When working in groups she "tries to make sure everyone has their own role." She adds, "When someone has an idea, we stop and listen to the idea." She wants the roles to be equal and for there to be "democracy in the project." She finds it easier to work with people who are as capable as she is, but says, "depending on what it is or who it is, I may rather work by myself." She makes clear that the leadership role not one she seeks when saying, "I don't lead." She will lead if necessary and will "step up" and question a leader who seems to be making a poor decision. Jessica shares that she enjoys watching instructional videos in her classes.

Courtney feels that working in groups is about "building trust" and knowing that everyone is going to do their parts. She likes "working with people" because it makes the work "more fun." About group work, Susan says, "Yeah, that's fine if we are doing an activity together if everybody is doing their part. If someone is just sitting back there clicking the [remote control], no they don't deserve a good grade if that is the only thing they do." She adds, "I like presentations."

Kate says that in group work when gifted students work with students who are not of their ability level that "we do all the work, and they will just sit there, and like offer to 'color this' and that is generally what happens because our grades are too important to let them suffer



for somebody else.” She explains, “I feel like the teachers are trying to help the other person, but for us, it is sort of bringing us down. It really doesn’t help the other student either. It really doesn’t help anyone, but [the teacher] is trying to help the person that’s lacking.”

Amy likes assessments that involve essay questions because “they have a much broader way of interpretation and ...many different answers can be given.” She does not like when students argue with the teacher about points taken off on an essay question. She “feels bad for the teacher.” She says that especially gifted students...will always argue with the teacher to get back points. She does not like when the teacher then ends up giving everyone a one hundred because the students have made the teacher feel bad. Amy hates true or false questions “because I always—like there’s one part of the sentence that I will overthink, and I will get it wrong.” She says she does not just “read the sentence and put [the answer] down.” Instead she “reads every little word of the sentence.” She thinks multiple choice questions are okay. Projects are a challenge for Amy because she has trouble finding a topic that is creative. She explains, “I have a couple of friends who are really good at this stuff, and if I collaborate with them, I think I learn new things that I would never have come up with by myself. So it’s really good to be exposed” to projects requiring some creativity.

Blake likes “short answer and multiple choice or fill in the blank.” He does not like essays or tests with essay questions. He likes multiple choice because “it gives you the basis but then you have to think through it to decide between answers that are really close together.”

Jessica likes multiple choice questions because she likes using “process of elimination,” and because, she says, “I am good at multiple choice.” She does not like true or false because, she explains, “you can make something true, into something false by changing one word.” She

does not like essay questions or writing an essay as a test because, she offers, “When I write, I worry about how I write instead of what I am writing about.”

Kate does not like standardized testing, though she almost made a perfect score on the language section of the SAT, and she does not like multiple choices. She also does not like essays. She would prefer to be graded in a class discussion where, she says, “you can put off all this knowledge, all the stuff you have learned.” She does not mind being graded on projects if they are individual projects.

Courtney says, “I hate true-false because I over think everything, so even if I know it’s one, I always pick the other.” Multiple choice can be good or bad, depending on the wording. She explains, “Multiple choice and true/false, you can know it and still get it wrong.” She continues, “I typically dread short answer, but I find that I normally do better on short answer than on multiple choice.” She says that “timed essays spike my stress level way up.” She enjoys projects and likes to share her work and hear about the work of others.

Amy believes that a great atmosphere in which to learn is “filled with questions.” She continues, “There is no silence in the classroom, and I feel especially in my harder classes, that that’s when the questions start to stop, which is the funny thing.” A great atmosphere for learning, according to Amy is “when you can all work it out together in class.”

To Amy an easy class is one where the requirement is just to memorize facts. She points out that discussion classes are really some of the hardest classes, but people think they are easy because “we are just talking, and they think we are doing nothing. They fail to see it as an actual learning experience. They do not understand how “much you can take from that [discussion].” “Some people think that any class you leave without any homework” is an easy class. Those classes that are just facts, according to Amy, are “perceived, at least by the people I hang

around...as the easy classes. Those are the busy work classes that you do at 10 o'clock when you're just done with everything you actually have to do." She considers the hard classes to be "the ones where you have to apply the information" you have learned. The example she gives is in her statistics class where, "the test questions are not purely computing, you have to compute and then you have to explain the context of the problem." She continues, explaining that the harder classes are "classes that require broader information that you have to extrapolate from. It's not just reading the chapter. Reading the chapter won't get you far."

Gifted students expressed common themes in their conversation about classroom strategies, activities, and assessments. Without exception, they stated they enjoy learning in an environment that allows some movement, much shared natural conversation about learning, and academic discussion that is structured and may be assessed. They want to discuss the content being taught with the gifted student or students who are gifted in the content area. They want to learn together. Unless they are the gifted student expected to offer explanation and insight to others, some want to listen quietly. Others want to talk and ask questions. Gifted students firmly delineate between academic conversation and academic discussion. Academic conversation is a non-structured learning strategy they often employ. Academic discussion is a strategy designed by the teacher. In academic conversation, many people may speak at once. In structured academic discussion, rules of conversation and courtesy must be followed. Gifted students seem to love both activities.

Gifted students usually do not mind working in groups if they are with people who share their academic ability and their desire to make high grades. They do not want to work with people of lesser ability or those who do not care as much about grades. They have a resigned acceptance that they will have to do most of the work and that people in the group may be

unpleasant partners with whom to work when the group is mixed ability. Most of the gifted students said they would prefer to learn together and be graded alone.

Busy work creates high resentment in gifted students. They do not like to waste time or to be shifted out of the way, which is why they feel teachers assign busy work to them. They also dislike unfair work where they do both the work assigned to the class and extra work that is also tied to a grade. They evaluate work as a balance between time required to complete it and the long-lasting value of what is learned.

Gifted students like different types of assessments, especially when the assessment discussed involves writing. Some love to write; some despise writing. Some love to read; others avoid reading. Most of them agree that they overthink true-false questions. Depending on the teacher, selected response questions can be fair or tricky. They dislike completion questions, but they feel they do well with them. Whatever the type of assessment, they want it to test what they know and have learned in a fair way. They want to know ahead of time when tests are scheduled and in what areas a teacher plans to be “picky.”

### **Characteristics of Teacher**

Amy feels that her opinion of her English classes has been “heavily [strong, sustained emphasis] dependent upon the teacher.” She explains that she has “always been geared more towards math and science.” She continues, “English has always, I love it, but it’s not the same feeling I have towards other subjects, I have to have the teacher that I really feel a connection with to enjoy my English class.” Amy says that “this year, in particular, I love my English class. According to Kate, having a teacher who is positive helps students to be positive; those teachers who are not positive “put [students] down, too,” and affect learning. She asks the question, “...if we don’t like the class, then why would we want to learn about it?” Blake says that as soon as a

teacher has to “make up things that aren’t true,” he realizes that he is smarter than this teacher. He adds that it is usually apparent when the teacher, “makes up a discussion.” He believes that he has had math teachers who are as smart as he is.

The teacher is the most important factor in feeling safe in a classroom, according to Amy. She explains that last year she felt “very safe in English” but, she continues, “This year in another class I have with almost the same people. The environment is totally [strong emphasis] different because the teacher is different.” When Jessica is asked how a teacher gets respect from a student, she explains, “[One teacher who has respect] doesn’t yell. All she has to do is give you that look, and all she needs is to talk in her voice. Yeah, they [the students] know. Other teachers have to yell and fuss, have about twenty minute sermons just to get them to be quiet.” Jessica feels as if situations like this waste her time. She has one teacher that she feels could be a good teacher if the students would let her talk. She describes a situation where the teacher “can barely finish a sentence without someone commenting on the sentence she has said.” She adds, “I am like, ‘oh, let her finish her thought!’”

Holly likes “when teachers talk through something with you, like when you don’t understand, and they go through each step, or they’ll explain something or bring in a story so that you are, ‘oh, that’s what that means.’”

Amy likes a teacher who does not push but still helps students move forward. She explains, “I love that teacher...because I feel like someone is taking, not necessarily taking me by the hand, but is in this journey with me. I feel like we could do it together, and you know I would jump twice as far than if I was by myself.” To Amy the word “gifted” has “always been kind of an iffy word for me,” but she says that the difference in a teacher who is gifted and one who is not is “the willingness to go one step further beyond the curriculum of the classroom.”

Amy adds that the people she does not want to disappoint are “those teachers who go that one step further.” She wants those same teachers to approve of her.

Blake’s description of a perfect teacher is one who is “willing to discuss their opinions and willing to include your opinions and not willing to just be rock solid on what they believe...and being understanding of your ideas or beliefs.”

Jessica’s perfect teacher is “one that has control of the classroom, has to be organized ...when it comes to our work and having us doing the work at the right time, she will be organized about that. She will be organized with putting our grades in on time.” She continues, “He or she has to talk to the class because some teachers don’t really talk to the class; they just pass out sheets and read over them.” For Jessica, the perfect teacher “has to have a voice that someone actually would want to hear, not just one straight voice like this [spoken in monotone], but have a projecting voice that changes so they can get someone’s attention.” Jessica believes a perfect teacher, “doesn’t have to necessarily be energetic, but they should at least act like they love their jobs.” She offers an example of a teacher who is not perfect, saying, “Like they come to school and are just “uuhhhgghhh, druggy about every day. Then we are going to be druggy.” A good teacher “should come with a positive attitude. They should come wanting to teach us. They need to be motivational. They need to know how to talk to a student”

Amy describes her perfect teacher as one who “would revisit discussions” She is a teacher “who doesn’t settle for silence” and who “pushes students to speak to get the ball rolling.” She is also a teacher who doesn’t bolt out of here as soon as the bell rings and who will stay after school...to work with students.” She likes a teacher who realizes that grades are important but who does not put so much emphasis on grades that “she won’t raise a 99 point something to 100.” Her perfect teacher would not spend most of his or her time working with

“the bottom of the class.” She explains, “Some teachers will teach to the bottom of the class, and I have a huge problem with that just because people who are at the top of the class, they don’t learn. We never move forward. It’s always the bottom of the class who’s like getting up to medium. The people who are at the top, we never progress at all. We leave there where we were.” She likes a teacher who teaches to the “bottom, the middle, and the top, so just everybody.” She likes teachers who allow students to practice “time management” by assigning work and setting a date for the assessment and then letting students work at their own paces. She likes teachers “who are not afraid to ask questions themselves...who just admit that they don’t know the answer.” She likes teachers who will let student opinions “filter through their brains.” According to Amy, teachers “need to have their own mindsets and how they believe, but it is not set in stone.” She laughs as she adds, “it’s all a membrane. It’s fluid.” Her perfect teacher is “genuine.” A teacher who makes her feel emotionally safe is one who has “a relaxed facial expression.” She continues, “Some teachers are really stiff.” She says that when students talk to these teachers they “have a hard face.” When she talks to a teacher, she likes to have their attention and not have them “running around their classroom.” She appreciates a teacher who “when they’re talking to you... they’re looking you in the eye and they’re just doing nothing. Their hands are in their lap and they just talking to you—that’s when you feel like they are really listening.”

Courtney enjoys being in the classroom with a teacher who is “open to students.” She believes that teachers learn along with students and that teachers gain new insights from their students just as students gain insights from teachers. She likes teachers who “definitely acknowledge that they are not the supreme of the classroom...and there is a back and forth [exchange of ideas]. Courtney’s perfect teacher is one who can “relate to their students...and the

students feel like they can confide in their teacher or they have a connection with their teacher and their teacher really understands them” Courtney thinks these characteristics would “make for an amazing teacher.”

Blake says that he feels safe or confident enough to express his real opinions when he “gets to know the teacher, and I know [he or she] accepts what you have to say and are not just going to rebuttal it and cut it off but will help you learn through that and help you add their opinions to it.”

Amy feels that the teachers that she least enjoys are those “who just give packets...straight off of the book. You copy it back and forth from the book, and they check it for completion.” She doesn’t like teachers who are “so oblivious” that they “still check off work that has obviously been copied from another student.” She also does not enjoy being in classrooms where teachers “just go through a PowerPoint...so monotonously that...you don’t even want to listen. You could just read it at home.” She says, “I come into the classroom with the exact same knowledge I leave with...if I haven’t backtracked because it is so boring.” Susan does not like for a teacher to “stand and read stuff off of a board without explaining fully and giving examples.”

Stephen does not like teachers who are “nit-picky”, and he feels that if they are going to “mark off points if the header is like half an inch from the top...it’s nice to know those things in advance.” He wants teachers who are going to “mark off on small details” to use a rubric so that he can protect his grade.

Kate believes that gifted kids can recognize when they have a teacher who is not gifted; she explains, “They have never been from the point of view of the gifted side to understand or it seems like they have never even seen a gifted kid, and they don’t understand how we learn.” She



thinks, “This is going to be horrible. They are not going to know how to teach us, and we get irritated on our part because we feel like we are doing work we shouldn’t be doing.”

Courtney believes that while gifted students know each other’s strengths and weaknesses because they have known each other so long, teachers do not know right away which gifted kids struggle with the particular subject being taught. She feels the teachers, “definitely get an idea, eventually.” She thinks that teachers should know in which areas gifted students are gifted, but she believes that gifted students would want to take gifted classes even if the subject is an area that is not easy for them. She explains, “I feel like another plus side of being in the gifted classroom is your peers definitely encourage you because we all have similar goals, and I feel like that really makes a difference in how much you try and how much you want to participate.” She believes that “a good gifted teacher teaches gifted kids differently within a gifted classroom.”

The gifted students interviewed agree that teachers should know the content area they teach. Courtney explains, “It is very clear, you can tell, the teacher who just knows what they are supposed to be teaching and who knows the whole idea of it. A lot of the times gifted kids come up with questions that are not textbook knowledge like you can’t just know, you have to think, and I think that helps when you feel like your teacher knows a lot.” She feels that teachers who have extensive content knowledge can answer a broad scope of deep questions about their content.

Amy says that most of her teachers know their content, but when a teacher does not, Amy “looks up” the answer or goes “to a teacher I know will have the knowledge.” Sometimes she goes to a teacher who may not have the knowledge but is willing to help, “and we look it up together. We can figure it out.”

Blake thinks that a teacher's knowledge has to be "over their expertise of knowledge." He explains, "The need to know what they are teaching and how to show it in multiple different ways since different people learn in different ways."

Jessica believes, "It is okay if a teacher says, 'I don't know', but they can't always say, 'I don't know.'" She continues, "That would get worrying. They need to know what they are talking about and be confident in that so that we can be confident that we are learning the right thing."

Few questions elicited responses more enthusiastic than those about teachers. Gifted students often assess the ability of a teacher to teach. They want a teacher they can trust to teach pertinent information that is all they need to know in the subject for the next level of learning. They want enthusiastic teachers who will not dampen their enthusiasm for learning. Teachers who teach are highly appreciated. Teachers who can teach are highly valued. Teachers who want to teach are loved. Teachers who know how to speak to the gifted and understand their thinking are prized.

### **Characteristics of Class**

Stephen approached the idea of safety from "the pyramid of needs." He feels "quite safe in this school environment," and adds, "The school's administration covers that." Jake feels safe at school and points out that the school has "steel doors."

Stephen continues to talk about levels of safety when he explains, "There are the higher feelings of safety, whether what you are being taught is going to be safe, relevant... what things your teachers taught you are going to be applicable...to things you are going to do." He adds, "A lot of that comes down to trust, you know that they are teaching you real skills that when you get out into the real world you actually need."

Jake also likes the predictability of knowing what will be learned in each class and gives as an example, “I know I am not going to talk about Beowulf in calculus.” He adds, “There is also this sense of like I know I am going to be doing something that I like.” He does not like “when we go to some new place or to a competition, and I don’t know what is going to happen. This is really scary.”

Kate feels that a safe classroom is one where a student can learn. For Kate, learning involves asking questions. She says, “Some people don’t raise their hands because they are scared of what [another] student is going to say. They may call you dumb for asking a question, or they might call you a smarty pants. From the teenage aspect, you don’t want to be an outlier. You want to be normal.” According to Kate, the classrooms that are safe are those where it is safe to ask questions, and where the teacher is “just happy that you are trying to better your understanding of what you are doing.”

A safe classroom for Holly is one, she says, “...where I don’t have to worry when I say something that people will judge me for it, and if I say something that is crazy or absurd or tell a personal story, I won’t feel like someone will look at me and attack me...just a nice environment to share.”

Jessica says that she feels safe in the English class she just left because of her teacher. She explains, “She has control over students. When she says something, the students know that she means it, and they will follow directions. In any other class but my [an elective class], any other class, they kind of run over the teacher. They treat the teacher as if she was another child. That kind of gets on my nerves...then all they do is talk the whole time. The teacher tries to control the class, but they can’t really because the students don’t have respect for the teacher.”

Blake says that English is “not the best,” but what he likes best about it is that he and his classmates “are able to express ourselves...our opinions.” He likes class discussions and says that he usually inputs “a good amount...may be 20%, depending on the class.” He admits that he will prepare for a discussion the night before if he is “not familiar with the circumstances.” He continues, “I’ll look it up so I know what I could argue with, or what the other person might argue back.” He enjoys debating. Besides discussions about government, he enjoys discussing scientific theories.”

Amy feels that English is “very important...it is the medium through which we speak everything, science, social studies.” She thinks, “it is important to learn how to properly communicate your thoughts and emotions without maybe coming off in the wrong way—of just how to express yourself appropriately while simultaneously conveying what you actually mean.” Jessica says that expressing her ideas to others is “very important to me.” She adds, “I keep using incorrect grammar. I’m sorry.” She says that when she has an idea that will help the team or others, “I wish to tell everybody.”

Amy shares that when her cohort of gifted students were first in high school that “it was very awkward among us just because we were new to each other. She explains they had a gifted English teacher who was “really good about having the environment be so comfortable, that for us to say something that comes off the top of our mind was just so easy.” She continues, “...in that environment that’s when your true opinions and your true questions start coming out...and that’s when you really start to learn because you’re not trying to filter what you’re saying.” When students ask unfiltered question, “honest answers” are given, and “a deep discussion” follows.

For Courtney the people in the classroom matter, the students and the teacher. She likes classes that are not regulated to the point that everyone has to raise his or her hand to speak. She ruefully admits that people like her without a strong voice, may benefit from having students raise their hands and wait to be acknowledged, but the negatives outweigh the benefits if the class is in a classroom discussion. She also shares that she “normally keeps her feelings to [herself] and that she does not “release everything to everyone.” Courtney also says that she does not like being in a classroom with people who are not gifted. “I find the class goes a lot slower than I normally like, or the discussions, or the things I hear are just not something I can relate to I guess a lot of the time,” she explains.

Stephen emphasizes that he likes “those environments that are very open-ended and you get a lot of freedom.” He continues that the best environments “are when you are pushed to your limits, and you know you are allowed to do these things that will better allow you to meet your full potential.” He offers an example of a classroom environment he does not enjoy as being one where “teachers will have a very strict kind of classroom. They expect you to do these certain things, meet these standards.” He believes that creativity can be stifled. Courtney says, “I do really like my lit classes because they are a lot different from other classes and are less like strictly structured, less note taking. It’s more thinking and ideas.”

Jake likes order. He “loves rubrics.” He does not feel constrained by the top grade category and feels that he can easily do more than is required. He does, though, want to know the requirements. He likes a rubric that “can guide me to the point where I can start being creative.” Stephen says that when talking about doing the “minimum” on an assignment, and when talking about gifted students doing the minimum, the minimum there is “covering each base on the rubric.” Making only a C is not doing the minimum. Blake does not like study sheets. He

explains, “I like to know when the tests are so I don’t walk in the classroom and it be, ‘well, there is a test today,’ but I don’t like it to be the same every week...the test is on the same day and that we have a study guide. That’s what I don’t like.”

Stephen observes that “the gifted environment is a completely different experience from what I’ve seen as a passer-by for a few non-gifted classes. My entire high school experience would be completely different if I were not in the gifted program.” He continues, “I see gifted students as being a lot more talkative. They are more loud and obnoxious you could say. The few good things in that are that it encourages classroom conversations, discussion... participation. In other classrooms you see people being very quiet, very timid, and I find that kind of a shame that certain other classrooms are like that.”

When music in the classroom was addressed, Amy says that she would not want to listen to hard rock while she was working, but that classical music is fine. She added that her mother shared with her that, “it is really bad to listen to music while you’re doing work because it inhibits your actual productivity.” Jessica says that classical music can help those students who want noise.

Amy shared that she likes Christmas lights in the classroom, and her perfect classroom will always have lights. It will also have “work of past students” because teachers who decorate their classrooms with lights and student work from past years “are creating a connection” and showing “they care about the relationship with their students.” Courtney also shared that she likes walls that are decorated with artwork. She does not like “empty classrooms because they do not feel homey.” She likes color but does not want the walls to be “super bright” because they are distracting and will cause a headache. Blake does not like for the walls “to be blank, and I don’t like them full of posters like all over the place. Some posters are good so there is not just

one color on the wall, but I don't want them to be full of color either." Blake says that he likes "orange...it's flashy but not too flashy."

Students have opinions of how their classroom should look. Primarily gifted students want a room to feel and look welcoming. The balance a teacher shows in decorating a classroom between art, student work, lights, posters, and color is an indicator for gifted students of the organization and welcome they will find when in the classroom. They trust their physical safety to the administration, locked doors, and teacher classroom management proficiency, but the mental security they feel is placed almost completely in the hands of the teacher. They feel the teacher teaches and sets parameters on the type of comments students can make in response to each other. Feeling secure in the classroom means being able to make comments without fear of hurtful verbal retaliation or judgment from peers and from the teacher. They want a classroom where learning can take place freely in terms of seating, rules, atmosphere, teacher expectation, and student participation.

### **Comparisons, Contrasts, and Perceptions in Gifted and Non-gifted**

Blake explains he wants, "people to think good things about me, to think that I'm just as good as they are, and perceive me worthy of their time and friendship. Courtney says that she is like most other people in wanting to be perceived as being "likeable" when people first meet her. Amy says that she does not want to appear to be immature, and that she wants someone who meets her to think that she can "carry on a conversation without having any awkward tension. I know that's normal if that happens every now and then, but, just relatable and at least comfortable with the person that I am talking to." She feels that being gifted makes her less approachable to some people. She is most bothered when students who are not gifted do not ask her for help "because they didn't think their questions are like good enough or something."

Holly wants to be perceived as “a confident educated woman.” Susan wants people to think she is, “kind, honest, willing to listen, trustworthy.” She says she wants them “to believe that they can talk to me about things they wouldn’t talk to anybody else about.” She concludes, “I am nurturing.”

Kate is both academically gifted and a gifted athlete, and she notes how she is treated differently as a participant in each arena. She says that it is not “weird” to be a gifted athlete, and adds, “The better you are as an athlete, the more people will look at you, will look up to you.” She feels that people treat academically gifted students much differently and says, “teens will call you a nerd, like you are a freak, like how do you retain all this information, and how can you do all of this, and it’s sort of freakish.” They ask, she says, “Why aren’t you just like us?”

Amy says that she “pays careful attention to setting up social media,” and feels that she and about half of her friends are successful in achieving the image they want to convey. The other half of her friends do not get the response or effect they want from what they post. She feels they are “careless with what they put up there.” What happens on social media is “a buzz at school the next day.” She sees now that what happens on social media “is not as dramatic as I used to perceive it to be.” She explains, “When I was freshman, I would pay much more attention than I do now.” She says that “even in the gifted environment, I see [interruptions from social media] happening from time to time.” She does not believe that people get picked on just because they are gifted.

Courtney says that she is careful of what she posts on-line. She says, “I’ve never known; I’ve never been able to tell what people think of me.” Kate is also careful about what she puts on social media. She wants what she says to be grammatically correct and says, “If it is going to be out there, it has to be perfect, and if it isn’t I either go and edit it or delete and repost.” She also



posts pictures of her doing “normal” things on Instagram. She wants people to know that she is not just “books and brains” all of the time. She wants to be perceived as “that well-rounded normal...a normal teen, not like a person that is outrageously smart.” One student had a particularly unpleasant experience with social media that, for a while, affected her desire to stay in the same school. Jessica feels that some people on social media are successful in making themselves seem, as she describes, “big and bad.” She continues, “They say stuff in a way to intimidate others. That’s how they speak.”

Kate says that she wants to seem like a “normal person.” She further explains, “I know some people think, in the high school setting, I’m weird or annoying because just by how my personality is.” She wants to be “perceived like I am a normal teenager. I have the same ideas, thoughts, that you do. It’s just I express my feelings different than ya’ll do.” She feels that in high school, “they just judge us by the cover, what we come off to be when you first meet us, how we sound, what we talk about, how fast we talk, stuff like that.”

Kate revisits this idea of misperception by others of the gifted when she says that “some teachers think, that we, as gifted students, don’t struggle, but there is still a struggle. Some teachers don’t realize that we can struggle because they just think we are so [draws out the word] amazing and out there that there is no struggle, no studying.” Kate continues, “Even other students don’t realize that [we struggle]. So we are always like the outliers. It’s getting better, especially...in high school because we are integrated into different classes. They realize we do struggle, and that we may be working six hours to study for something when they thought we had just gone in blind.” Kate also feels that “regular teachers give gifted students in their classes a little more respect and a little more leeway.” She adds, “Teachers who teach gifted students are like, ‘I know what your mind can do,’ and they set boundaries more firmly.”

Holly says, “When you go into a normal class and you are gifted, they are like, ‘why don’t you know this? You should know this. Hold, on. She doesn’t know everything.’” Holly continues, “I never said I know everything. I was put into this.” She feels that gifted students are put in difficult positions. She offers an example, saying, “A lot of times kids take the gifted test in second grade, and they’ll grow up and they’ll change. They act more immature, I would say, than normal kids. They’re not bad, but because they have the gifted label, they seem worse than they are. If they were in a normal, general class rather than a gifted class, they would be perceived as normal and would be perfectly fine. It affects how you are perceived because they are an extreme, and there is really not a middle ground there for gifted kids. The normal kids see you as gifted, and the gifted kids see you as normal. If you are labeled gifted you are supposed to be smart and know everything. There are very few people who are like, ‘you’re gifted, but you act like a normal kid, a little immature sometimes, but you’re still gifted.’ You’re still smart, but there are very few people who see it that way.”

Holly comes back to this issue and says, “The gifted child—they’re supposed to know everything. They are supposed to be well-behaved. Those are the main points of the stereotype. Creativity is a big part in that, but as I see it, I don’t think I’m creative. I think others who aren’t labeled gifted are extremely creative, and if creativity was the main point of gifted, they would definitely be gifted. There are kids who are gifted with intelligence and the ability to converse and relate to people. There are different points of gifted, and it is all grouped into one. If someone is lesser with one point, it kind of affects everything.”

Courtney says that non-gifted kids may not understand her or why she would “complain about a 95, but my gifted friends can understand why I would be mad about that.” Kate says that she has a difficult time sometimes communicating with people who are not gifted because, she

says, “the people that don’t understand the gifted side” do not understand us. She continues, “I think the maturity is different in a gifted kid and a regular kid. I feel like gifted kids have a little higher maturity, and that might just be ‘cause how we learn, we had to grow up faster.”

Amy has noticed that among her gifted peers or in the gifted classroom that no one receives much more respect than anyone else because they are all gifted. When she notices that she is treated differently, “if we have a sub and regular and gifted classes have to integrate.” She notes that, “it is kind of like two separate kinds of worlds and the regular people kind of, they feel like they are backing down or something, so I feel like there is a degree of respect that we receive from them.” She has noticed, too, that “teachers who only teach regular kids” give the gifted kids a kind respect. She continues, “I hear them in the hallways sometimes like ‘you have the gifted kids’, so I guess the notion is out there.”

When asked if being gifted carries a responsibility to others, Jessica answers, “I feel like I depend on more people, and people don’t really depend as much on me.” She continues, “...they don’t really, most people don’t know that I am gifted or smart...because of the way I act.” She further explains, “I am just being myself and people can’t...really tell if I am being serious or not sometimes, but to me, it’s kind of obvious.”

When discussing being in classes that are advanced and with students who are not gifted and are older, Jessica shares, “I’m the only [younger] kid in there, and I am the only gifted kid in there, but they treat me as if I am not even supposed to be in there. One guy even said one day... [Smack] why are you even in here? Get out.” She continues, “That kind of hurt my feelings.” She still thinks that putting gifted students in the next grade in advanced content is a good idea, and says that it worked well for her the previous year.

When Kate was in all regular classes, she says, “I was always bored out of my mind, finishing my work in like five minutes and getting in trouble ‘cause I’m trying to help other students understand, and I know I had problems running into that before I got tested or I was in full-out gifted.” She continues, “I know in fifth grade, there was [a gifted pullout program], and that was the only time I got to be with other gifted students. It wasn’t enough. In middle school I was with the same class most of the time, but not all of the classes were gifted classes. It just is not enough because you get bored, and some people think you are being disrespectful ‘cause you’re finished so you read a book, or you get bored with a teacher trying to teach something you already know.” She offers with relief, “That’s why I like high school because I am pretty much all the time treated as gifted except when I have to do the individual work.”

Jake decided this year to take a regular class in one subject rather than the AP class in that same subject because, he explains, “I like to have free time.” He says that the class is easy and without studying, he gets a 95 or above on the tests. The reason he explains that he does not really like the class is that “the class is quiet and not really active.” He continues, “I only have one person to talk to, who chose to take the class for the same reason I did, and we are the only two people who can actually have a conversation with each other.” Another problem he adds is “teacher interaction in those kinds of classes...the teachers are going through a PowerPoint real slowly and staying on the slide for 10 minutes.” He adds, “I’d rather be reading *Lord of the Rings*. When asked how long learning takes for him, Jake replies, “I can usually hear or read something and then repeat it once I get home, and then, I’ll remember it for the rest of the year.” He laments, “In gifted classes we cover a lot more material than the regular classes...and go a lot more in-depth.” He feels as if he is not learning what he should be learning in the class.

Procrastination tends to be a characteristic of gifted students, but Stephen makes that point that “most students are masters of procrastination.” Stephen tries to stay on task because that gives him “additional space to create.” He explains, “I like to challenge myself if I have the spare time, which helps if [I] am not procrastinating.” Jake shared the senior quote of a former student as being one with which he was in agreement. The quote he shared is, “I don’t procrastinate; I prioritize differently.” He says that he plans when each task he has been assigned will be completed. He generally prefers to complete the work in the class he has just before the work is to be turned in. He practices well-planned procrastination.

Kate feels that she procrastinates when she has to work alone on an individual assignment. She likes to talk about what she is doing with another person. When she works alone, she feels that she is “easy to distract.” Susan says, “I do not procrastinate...ever. I begin working on an assignment the day it is given to us.”

Gifted students strongly feel the differences in themselves and others. If they were to try to forget or ignore those differences, they would expect to be quickly reminded that those differences exist. The differences include being expected to know copious amounts of information concerning almost any topic. According to some teachers and those who are not identified as gifted, this knowing should happen without any effort or without study. Gifted students know that they can learn some content at impressive depths with little time or effort involved, but they also know they do make an effort to know and learn. This effort requires some time.

They also feel that their extremely and almost incessantly active brains set them apart. They feel as if their minds spin and reach persistently for more information and understanding. They often analyze without conscious thought, and they find both comfort in their ability and

discomfort in the bossy aspect of brain activity that interferes with their ability to conduct life in what appears to be normal way.

### **On Being Gifted**

Courtney believes that being gifted is “very important.” She explains, “I think gifted classes, there is the level of difficulty that is higher, but I feel it is also that the way they require students to think is a lot different. It is not straight up memorization. It’s more analytical. You have to think about things, and you have to have the background knowledge, but you also have to be able to apply it.”

Courtney also believes that gifted students assess people “by their intelligence,” and she is not sure that other kids necessarily “read people when they first see them...their intelligence isn’t the first thing they would think of.” She believes she can tell someone is gifted “by the ways they conduct themselves or the way they hold conversations. I feel like if you are having an intellectual conversation with someone, then you can definitely feel like their thinking level is high.”

Stephen explains that he comes to school because it gives him “purpose.” He admits that he has a hard time in the summer finding something to do. He says that he spends summers, “working on-line from course materials from like MIT ...just to challenge myself or give me something to do.” He continues, “Otherwise, you essentially are living a repeated routine of boredom.” He believes “school offers a place to help relieve yourself from that [boredom].” Stephen adds that he also “really like philosophy a lot so enjoy watching a few lectures on philosophy occasionally and reading particularly western philosophy like say Nietzsche or some other...and some of the classics, too.” He giving his reasons why he enjoys philosophy he explains, “Generally, I like things that twist your view of the world, like give...a new like, a way

of thinking.” Jessica comes to school because she needs to graduate from high school before she can go to college and begin working to become a pediatric psychiatrist. She also says, “I somewhat like school. I like being around people. My mama wouldn’t like it if I didn’t come to school, so I come for her.”

Jessica likes psychiatry and psychology and says “If someone wants to know about a mental disorder, I’ll look that up. I type in mental disorders, and it shows the list.” She says, “I went through each one. I didn’t know much about it, and I read about it.”

Kate thinks that gifted students should be taught in small classes of 12 to 15. Her reasoning is that “we are still interactive, but it is not so many people it’s all jumbled ideas.”

Gifted students do not like being assigned extra work because they are gifted. Blake says, “One thing I don’t like is that...like in [middle school] the gifted kids would have to do the one assignment or they would get a 0 for it, but if the other kids did it, they got bonus points.” The gifted students had to do all of the same work the other students did and then they had an extra assignment. Blake shares another situation that he feels was unfair. He says “we also had to write essays while the other kids didn’t have to write essays because we were gifted. And they had just one specific way doing things, and we couldn’t do it any other way.” He shared that sometimes he wishes he was not gifted. He explains, “The easier classes, in my opinion, have easier work. It is easier for them to make 100. If I was in that [same] class...for me to make 100, I would have to work harder than they do.”

Imagination held different levels of importance and opinions in the thinking among the gifted students. Courtney sees imagination as “the root of learning, almost.” Blake thinks it is somewhat important until he applies the idea to music. He likes to improvise when he plays, rarely plays music as it is written, and he likes playing with other people who improvise. He

feels that the people who play with him are good at what they do. Blake believes that when he is improvising, he is using his imagination. Amy sees imagination as “very important because it is a huge part of creativity.” She believes that “imagination goes beyond the humanities. It goes on to science and math, and I think imagination is key to the progression of society.”

Jessica uses her imagination when she prepares and stores information. She explains, “I pretend. The teacher and I are having a conversation and she tells me a story, she sings a phrase or two. I pretend that is happening. That is how I remember, cause it is like telling me a story about something. I picture them telling me a story.” She adds, “All my teachers can tell stories.”

Kate feels that without imagination “everything would be dull.” She questions, “If you read a book and there is no imagination, how would you know what a character would look like?” She adds, “Imagination is what leads to the creation of things, to new ideas, to everything.”

Reading is both a form of entertainment and a source of information for gifted students. Courtney has “always loved to read fiction stories,” and says that she is “not a huge non-fiction person. She likes to read anything where “you can feel like you’re in the book and everything just kind of disappears.” Blake says that he likes to read, “depending on the material.” He adds, “Some things I am interested in and some things, I’m not, but reading is okay.” Kate loves to read and says that her room at home is “practically a library.” She enjoys books by Christian authors and “on the other side of the spectrum, magical fiction.” She likes reading a series, and before she starts reading, she wants to have all of the books in the series so that she does not have to wait after finishing one to start the next one. Holly says, “I don’t pick up a book every day.” She explains, “my passion is writing, not reading.



Almost all of the gifted students interviewed acknowledged that they have at times pretended to be less smart than they are. Blake used the coping strategy in elementary school when the “kids would pick at me.” He wanted people to stop trying to cheat by copying his answers. Courtney does not pretend to be different, but says, “If my intelligence wouldn’t impress them or they wouldn’t care about it, it is not something that I feel I have to show off.”

Kate says that she pretends to be less smart when she first meets people. She says, “I try to fit in.” She offers an example, “In this new setting...I didn’t want to speak like I do, or be so out there. I just tried to be shy, sound like I didn’t know anything so I could be more accepted, cause, I wanted to hang out with these people.”

Amy says she pretends to know less than she does when wants to ask a question, and she is not certain that the teacher knows the answer. She does not want to be put in the position of having to “correct” the teacher, and she also does not want the teacher to be put in that position. She poses what would be a statement in the form of a question to appear to know less. The example she gives is of “the basic math we have learned...where we are shot the information...and there is no conceptual understanding behind it.” When she wants to understand the concepts, she asks a question “that requires conceptual understanding. Sometimes the teacher will falter in the explanation, and that’s when I feel like I don’t want to push her, so I kind of act like I don’t really know what’s going on, but I still don’t 100% understand.” She recognizes that the teacher cannot answer the question and that she knows more than the teacher. In seeking to know more, she does not want to embarrass the teacher. She then pretends to know less. Susan says that she never pretends to be less smart than she is.

Holly says that she does not pretend to be less smart than she is and says, “I lose respect for the girls who do that and pretend to be dumber for guys. I just don’t understand it. I think, ‘It’s like 2016, and you have a right to have a mind, so use it.’”

Courtney decided that the people who bother her most are those who are arrogant. She explains that arrogant people are a “pet-peeve...that really gets to me.” Amy said that she wants to shake up people “who memorize their way through high school and just don’t have any conceptual true understanding of what the meaning of all of this is.” Kate is most bothered by those who doubt her and as she explains, “try to put me down.” Even in the gifted classes, people say that she “is not smart enough” to take Advanced Placement classes typically taken by older students or college level classes. Blake thinks that the kids who used to “kick my shins in elementary school” are the ones about whom he feels that most aggravation. Blake feels that gifted students should be in separate classes from the non-gifted because “after elementary school [being picked on] really stopped because we had separation in classes... between the smarter ones and the not as smart ones. So that cut out all of that.” He feels that separating gifted from non-gifted would be a good practice in elementary school, too. He says that the students who kicked him “realized I was smart.” He appreciates that gifted kids in his class now express respect for his intelligence “through friendship...and being understanding of [him] and considerate of what [he] thinks.” Blake believes that people’s feelings matter.

Blake shares that a lot of the people who were unkind to him in elementary school have admitted that he is smart and that they should have been nice to him. He says that he has forgiven them and is friends with ‘most of them.’ He is not friends with some of them. For those who would still be mean, he shrugs when talking about them and says, “I usually don’t see those people. I usually avoid them or don’t have classes with them...so.”

Amy has noticed that most of the gifted “are very afraid to be wrong. They are afraid to ask questions that make them seem less intelligent...because of this I feel that education is really, it’s prohibited a lot in that if you are gifted, you have to know everything already. You go into the classroom correcting people or you’re kind of silent. You don’t really ask a question unless you have no other option.” She feels that she views asking questions somewhat differently and that “we’re here to learn, so if my question is stupid, it’s stupid.”

Blake stated that though he loves music, performs often, and plays six instruments he has never tried out for All State band because “I—I just don’t want to be—don’t want to feel the disappointment of not making it.” He further explains, “I just don’t really stick my neck out there where I could fail. I only like to do, usually, the thing I know I can do instead of taking a chance on failing.”

Courtney wants to share that she is “very, very thankful for the gifted program here. I definitely feel like I would not have received even close to the education that I have now if I wasn’t in the gifted program. I find it really important, and I feel like I enjoy my gifted classes more than my non-gifted classes, and I feel like I develop closer relationships with the people in my gifted classes than the people who are not in my gifted classes.” Amy likes being in her present. She feels that “who you are in the future relies on who you are now, and so I think it is a great place to be.”

Gifted students report that they assess what is normal to other people and sometimes try to reach that plateau themselves. They are often hurt by the actions and words of others when their efforts fail. One of the first aspects of their personalities they try to subdue when attempting to appear normal is their intelligence. They change their speech patterns, and they keep insightful observations to themselves in an effort to conceal their intellect.

The attempt to appear “normal” is not really tied to an attempt to be normal. This theme may apply much more strongly to those gifted students who have remained in gifted programs. Most gifted in high school gifted programs seem to have a deep appreciation for their giftedness and for the ways it positively changes their lives. They look forward to the times when through their intelligence, hard work, and experiences in college they become successful in the professions they think they have already chosen based on their specific areas of giftedness and their passions.

### **Reporting**

Most of the students talked extensively, offering examples, personal stories, and honest feedback. One waded carefully into the water, and like a child afraid of waves, had to be coaxed step by step. One stopped each step of the way and asked a question of clarification, and then another question, and another. Finally, confident that she knew she would not falter, she answered the original question. Even knowing I was led to reveal what I was seeking, I gave her the direction and information she sought. I did not use as much of what she said as I did of what others said because I knew that she had persisted in seeking clarification to the point that my words found their way in to her answers. More than a few questions, though, elicited an immediate, heartfelt response, and that was what was found of her in the quotes and themes. They enjoyed the interview process. One asked if she could talk to me again. Each of them made stronger eye contact as the interview proceeded. Two scooted their chairs closer to the table and leaned forward. They liked the questions. They enjoyed being the authorities. Five called me by name as they said, “goodbye.”

As I worked with conveying themes, I carefully tried to offer the key components of the story told by each gifted child. Occasionally, a theme may be over recounted, but what was

shared was important to the reported thinking of each child. Describing the gifted from my perspective is what I do some part of every week. The goal was to describe the gifted using their answers, their stories, their experiences, and their lens. Jake, Holly, Courtney, Kate, Stephen, Susan, Jessica, Blake, and Amy are gifted people. Each one of their narratives is important. Each one values the story he or she had to tell.

### **Theoretical Framework Revisited**

As I began this study, I already had extensive experience in living and working with gifted individuals. I base much of how I approach gifted students on a belief in gifted theory. I work with the premise that the gifted are a group with characteristics that define them and separate them from other groups. The label and the perceptions may be a construct, but the ability is inherent. It exists. It is an integral part of who these people are and how they view, address, manage, and grow the world and how they view, address, influence, and cope with other people who share this same world with them.

Through sharing research and the opinions of others who study the gifted, I have tried to portray both the points of agreement and disagreement among these researchers in the areas of characteristics, talents as opposed to gifts, personality traits, emotional stability, passions, social challenges, otherness, effects of labeling, educational preferences, vulnerability, power, worthiness, and other aspects of giftedness that compile a list as long as any list of any group's or individual's makeup would be.

How to best serve the gifted and what comprises fair and equitable education for the gifted are areas that again create disagreement for most, despair for some, and rancor too many times. I am one who feels both disagreement and despair. I do not feel we help our gifted students to expose their talents, cope with their challenges, or experience positive social and

emotional learning. Going to the gifted, hearing their individual stories, and sharing those stories with others seemed like a good way to help others see the gifted students as people. They may be bright people. They may be funny, arrogant, demanding, kind, caring, confused, driven, and a so many other applicable descriptives, but they are children in our schools. They are people.

The first surprise I had was how much I enjoyed the interviews. The students were friendly, emotional, articulate in most cases, open, and eager to share their thoughts and ideas. I so enjoy teenagers, and gifted teenagers are really entertaining. The students I interviewed were expressive, demonstrative, and ready to inform. The second surprise was how much time the students had spent analyzing teachers and the school experience. They did not just make observations; they shared insights based on evidence and careful, diligent, comprehensive, first-hand study. I was happy with the kindness and forgiveness I heard the gifted express. They acknowledged openly that they are sometimes under attack, both physical and verbal, from students who are non-gifted, but they seemed to forgive them based on the challenges other students face in school. They expressed their understanding of how it must feel to not be gifted in an academic situation.

I had not realized that gifted students are quite so adept and persistent in forming learning communities among themselves. They identify each other's gifts and trade instruction, fully anticipating that material they do not understand will be taught to them by other gifted students. They have found a way to cement their learning and augment their educations. They support each other, and they have some of the best instructors that can be found helping them in their school work.

I also had not realized that our elementary and middle grades approaches to gifted learning may be more detrimental than helpful to our younger gifted students. The pull-out

programs seem to create more instead of less work, more separation from the daily peer group than creation of a gifted peer group, and less buy in from the gifted for the gifted programs. This area of study is one that needs more attention. Educators have been approaching the pull-out programs as though they are better than offering no services, but for some gifted students this case may not be true. Middle grades offer a better situation when gifted students move in one pod that includes all of the gifted students. Other students, usually bright students, travel with the gifted. Not all classes are advanced content classes, though, and those that are not are not favorable to gifted learners. Most of the gifted students interviewed briefly discussed elementary and middle grades gifted education, but the greatest indicator of the weaknesses of the earlier programs was the enthusiasm with which the interviewees embraced the changes in high school. These changes include being in honors, gifted, and advanced classes almost all if not all of the day. The classes by definition tend to attract and accept only those students who are gifted or who are highly capable in the specific content area.

In all of my years of teaching gifted students, cohorts of gifted endorsements, and instructors for gifted endorsements, I do not believe that I have described gifted students as being talkative or energetic. I see many teenagers as being talkative or energetic, but the gifted students interviewed specifically and often referred to themselves as being more talkative and energetic than other students. For them, the characteristics seem to be connected with having a super active brain that seems to constantly spin and produce words and thoughts. They express sadness at seeing other classrooms where students seem bored, quiet, and withdrawn from learning. They express what is almost anger at having to endure those types of classes themselves.

Being talkative and energetic are key components to the kind of learning most gifted students want to experience and that they find to be most effective for them. They want that

relaxed, conversation-based classroom. I felt that this was true and ran a class where students were allowed to freely exchange and seek ideas, following protocols of respectful and controlled commentary and feedback. I did not understand the clear distinction gifted students place on gifted conversation and gifted discussion. Conversation and discussion are involved in most English classes, in most classes of any content area, where students are highly engaged in learning. I had often used the words conversation, discussion, and discourse interchangeable, but for the interviewees, these activities have their own sets of rules, student participation expectations, teacher responsibilities, and grade implications.

I felt that outside influences greatly affect classroom learning, and for two of the students who were interviewed, this situation was true. One student had been bullied in earlier years because, in his words, he “was too smart.” Another student was still experiencing the painful fallout from a social media situation. This area is another that needs further study, but it will probably need to be conducted with students outside of middle school or high school. I had some shared conversation from the interviews that is powerful, but I cannot reveal their words or indirectly begin the unmasking of their identities. The students trusted me. Several students interviewed said that they had at different times withdrawn from social media because they did not want to be involved in some situation involving themselves or acquaintances. The time off of social media ranged from several weeks to almost a year.

The nine students interviewed were students with stories to share. I could not pursue some of the stories because of the restrictions put on my research by IRB, the Institutional Review Board. The questions I asked had to be open-ended and cleared of the potential to create stress for students in high school. I had to be careful when asking questions for clarification or further narrative. I deeply regret that these restrictions created a reporting that was shallow in



comparison to what it should have and could have been. The balance we seek in the research we do is one where students are protected and where learning from asking questions and conducting a fair interview yields new, prized and respected information. If we are prohibited from asking questions and listening to the answers the students volunteer to share, how will we make education personal to our students?

Much of what I learned fit well into my perceptions of the gifted. These perceptions included their concern about grades, their love or hate for reading, their love or hate for writing, and their appreciation and even adoration for a teacher who teaches well. I was surprised by the strengths of the peer-groups they are forming, their easily stated confidence when expressing differences in themselves and the abilities they have in contrast to the abilities of other students who are not considered to be academically gifted, and how much analysis they had personally conducted concerning education in general and particularly involving their own educations. I was not surprised by the hurt they feel when others throw words like nerd and freak at them or when the expectations and understanding of others about their abilities are significantly mistaken.

The students I interviewed seemed emotionally secure, especially those who had a strong peer group of gifted friends. Some were still quietly coping with their giftedness and their isolation from others, but they were coping. They were looking forward to futures they feel will be successful and happy.

My theoretical framework supports the learning that took place in this study. I found greater clarification of whom the high school gifted are and what their educational needs seem to be. They were nicer teenagers than I expected to meet. The themes that evolved as I worked with the interviews were cohesive and rarely contradictory. Gifted students have different specific

preferences, but they seem to value the same general conditions in life, friendship, classmates, classrooms, teachers, learning, and self.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The information learned from the interviews will be used in professional development seminars and workshops to inform teachers and administrators about reaching, teaching, and serving the gifted. The gifted students interviewed had clear ideas of what they need as gifted people in a classroom setting. The perceptions gifted students share concerning an English classroom as a physically and emotionally safe environment for learning is a significant part of the discussion, and the answers to the research questions guide the organization of the presentation of material in the workshop.

The first section of the seminar recounts how the gifted view themselves in terms of how they learn, the tendency to avoid or embrace procrastination, the importance and use of imagination, the wont to self-coach, and the continuous influence that being gifted has on their personalities and their experiences as students. Insights gained through the interviews of how the gifted characterize themselves are shared. Understanding how the gifted view themselves is an important precursor to understanding how their academic, emotional, and social needs can be addressed in the classroom.

The next four sections of the workshop deal with aspects of the classroom that makes it appealingly safe to gifted students. The first of these four sections offers insights the gifted have into their classmates and marks a clear delineation in their views of those classmates who are gifted and those who are not. When talking about gifted classmates the clear themes are the rarity of misbehavior and the value they hold as friends and learning partners. Non-gifted classmates are seen as more likely to misbehave and disrupt learning, and more likely to learn at a slower rate. The need for differentiation is a consistent theme and is discussed as it pertains to classroom

situations among the gifted, among the non-gifted, and among all when the gifted and non-gifted are both present in a mixed classroom.

The second of the four sections based on characteristics of a classroom where learning is a safe experience focuses on the teacher. Gifted students highly value the relationships they share with their teachers and consider the quality of this relationship as being a significant indicator of whether the classroom is safe. One aspect of the relationship is whether the teacher openly exhibits a love for teaching, which the gifted see as an indicator of a love for students. The gifted believe that a teacher should have impressive and significant knowledge in three different areas. They should have a deep, working knowledge of the content being taught; knowledge of how to teach that content effectively; and the understanding of students that gives them the knowledge of how to talk to students in a responsible and caring way. A theme that was consistent throughout the interviews is that every day a teacher should teach. The idea that classroom learning should be organized was also addressed. Most of the gifted directly mentioned that they want a teacher to at least be organized enough to know that all important components of the lesson have been taught and to schedule a test far enough ahead to be able to share with students the date the assessment will be given.

The third of the four parts of the workshop that addresses the classroom environment is a discussion concerning strategies and activities. Without exception, the gifted student interviewed indicated that they like to be in a classroom where learning and talking are the norm. Gifted students want to talk through their learning with each other and be in a situation that allows freely talking to the teacher and asking the teacher questions. When the teacher is teaching, they want to learn quietly; when the teacher finishes presenting the lesson, they want to learn together. When the time comes to be assessed, they have different preferences. Some want quiet,

so they can focus. Others want a noisy classroom, so they can focus. They want the teacher to allow separation of the students who require quiet and the students who require sound. Gifted students divide learning through talking in the classroom into two distinct and separate activities. Classroom conversation is relaxed, unstructured, and is focused on the academic. It is not an event; it is part of the learning journey. Classroom discussion, academic discussion, and academic discourse all refer to the same lesson that is structured, teacher monitored, may be used as a formative or summative assessment, is usually text driven, and is a learning activity. Academic discussion is an event. The other strategies find varying degrees of love, acceptance, dislike, and aversion among the gifted. The feelings elicited by each strategy or activity fell on a continuum from loathing to passion as reported by the gifted students. The strategies and activities addressed are presentation, reading, writing and the use of rubrics, grammar, group work, and assessments.

The last of the four parts of the seminar or workshop that address the learning environment is the classroom itself. Perhaps the strongest theme that emerged from this conversation is that the arrangements of the desks and the selection of which desk to occupy for a gifted student makes a large difference in the comfort felt by the student while in the classroom. Gifted students select the desk in which they sit for a reason. The reason involves their comfort level in the classroom, how visible they are to others, how visible others are to them, the interest they have in participating in the learning, how much they already know about the topic, the acceptance they feel or do not feel from the teacher, and the acceptance they feel or do not from their classmates. They also gave insights into their preferences for appearance which involved lighting, color, and how much and what is covering the blank walls. They indicated that physical safety is generally not an issue. Emotional safety is judged through the

comfort level they feel in sharing their ideas and in the perceptions they have of the expectations and opinions the teacher and the classmates have for them as gifted people.

The sixth topic of the workshop or seminar returns to the gifted themselves and the challenges they perceive they face, which can affect how emotionally safe they feel around other people in a school setting. Common themes made apparent through coding interviews and which are addressed in the workshop are that stereotypes the gifted face are often incorrect and can be cumbersome. Social media is an issue and should be carefully managed. Grades are usually highly important, and focusing on grades can get in the way of learning. ADHD for a number of gifted students creates the need for developing coping skills. The gifted brain never stops and is not always a comfortable entity with which to live, learn, play, sleep, or perform. The fear of being wrong is real and is debilitating. Busy work takes up valuable time, and gifted students value their time. The decision is often made not to do busy work. When a gifted student finds himself or herself in a regular education classroom, busy work is too often all they perceive they do. Unfair assignments are worse than busy work. The gifted students indicated they feel work is unfair when they are expected to do the same work as others in the same classroom plus additional work for which they are graded. They also feel that for some teachers differentiation comes only in the grading, and they perceive this practice to be highly unfair. Perhaps the greatest theme is the difference gifted students feel between themselves and those they describe as being “normal.” The complete acceptance and belief they have that the difference is actual is a noteworthy and substantial factor that guides their behaviors in academic and social settings. For teachers and administrators it is also a strong clue in understanding the thinking and needs of the gifted.

The final topic of the workshop is a two-fold call to action to both identify and to serve well the gifted students in our schools and particularly in English classes. The characteristics of the gifted have been fully identified and addressed throughout the workshop. The needs they have both academically and emotionally have been discussed. The significant components of the learning environment have been addressed. The insight and knowledge needed to accept the call to action has been shared.

The discussion of what we have learned from the gifted can begin with that most basic question, “Who are the gifted?” The nine students who were interviewed each had a story to tell. That they wanted to share their stories can be inferred from the fact that they volunteered to take their time to come and sit with a woman they had never met and who offered nothing to them and answer questions for about an hour.

### **Self-Characterization**

#### **Learning Styles**

Gifted students are like all students in that they have a wide variety of learning styles. They may be different from other students because they evaluate and assess their learning styles and the learning styles of others. They know that some of their classmates are, in one of their most used descriptions, “energetic,” meaning that they are talkative. They like to work and learn in a loud, relaxed setting. Other students enjoy quiet when they are working, though they do usually enjoy discussing their learning with others. Some gifted students are “hands on,” and talking to each other counts as doing. All of the students mentioned that they want to be in a quiet setting while the teacher is teaching because hearing each word is important. Few like a PowerPoint presentation unless it serves, as it should, as a background for the teacher’s introduction and explanation of content, rather than a script where each word is read. Most

students like teacher notes, but they want these notes to be an aid rather than the sole method of garnering knowledge. Some students use flashcards; many of them like study groups with all members having equal ability or all members making quality contributions to the group's learning.

They want teachers to teach in the way that they learn. They recognize the challenge facing teachers when working with loud learners and quiet learners in the same classroom. The solution offered is to allow the quiet students to wear ear buds to muffle the noise or to allow those students to work away from the noise, either in a quiet place in the hall, the media center, or in another teacher's room who is not currently teaching. The noise and interaction with other students is as important to those who learn with activity as the quiet is to those who learn quietly. The students feel that teachers keep the room quiet for the quiet learners because they work on taking stimulus away until the child who needs the least stimulus can function. They do not recognize that the child who needs learning catalysts is just as stifled in a quiet setting as the quiet learner is distracted in a noisy setting.

### **Procrastination**

Procrastination is a characteristic often exhibited by gifted students, but not all gifted students procrastinate. Those who do may put off doing a task until they have to work with focus and total concentration to finish it. They may find concentrating difficult without a time constraint. Other gifted students rarely procrastinate. They begin an assignment when it is assigned and complete it as soon as is possible. They may want time to perfect the product. Perfectionists are more likely to be the gifted students who do not procrastinate. Many gifted students are active in multiple areas. They do volunteer work, may play several sports, may be involved in church activities, and often take an extremely heavy course load in high school and



college. These students are adept at organizing their time because they have to be in order to reach the level of success that satisfies them.

### **Imagination**

Most of the gifted students interviewed directly stated that they do not find themselves to be creative, but they do use their imaginations when they play their instruments, write, and read. They use their imaginations when they work in the areas of their passions and greatest interests. They see imagination as the source of creativity and as the first colorful step in divergent thinking. When teachers, then, are looking for highly creative students in school, they may be overlooking students who do not use their imaginations in school based projects and work. One student directly stated that creativity must not be a major characteristic of gifted students because the most creative people she knows are not labeled gifted.

So much of what gifted students have to teach about education applies to most or almost all students. When the gifted students discussed imagination and saw it as “the root of all learning” or the “key to the progression of society,” educators can surely realize how strategies allowing students to use and extend their imaginations can be important to all students. All students, though, may not have developed the skills or the imagination to verbalize how they view an abstract concept like imagination.

### **Self-Coaching**

All of the gifted students interviewed have conversations with themselves, and most of them involve self-coaching. They have conversations where they offer next steps and order to a day or process. They cheer themselves on to success. The phrases they often use in explanation of this phenomenon are “you got this!” and “you can do this!” I noted the second person they used instead of first person. They also use the silent talk to maintain focus. Driving in traffic was

an example given. Other students said they think through the steps they take coming to school, going to the locker, getting books, and moving to their first class. Still another example given by one student was laying out the plan for the day which may include doing math homework in first period since first period's homework was finished yesterday before leaving school, and then in math doing Advanced Placement United States History (APush) homework. No homework was done in APush, so the homework for fourth period would have to be finished at lunch.

### **Always Gifted**

Gifted students are always gifted. Almost all of the students directly expressed the pleasure they find in having all advanced, gifted, AP, honors, and college classes now that they are in high school. They discuss the hard times of being in "regular" or "normal" classes in elementary school and middle school. They feel that pull-out programs are good, but they are not nearly enough. They say that middle school was some improvement over elementary school because they traveled in a gifted pod. In this pod, though, not all of the classes they took had advanced content, and not only gifted students traveled in the pod. The students who are in any "regular" classes discussed the hardship of not learning enough, learning slowly, boring teachers, boring content, student misbehavior, resentment from "normal" classmates, and the discomfort of not fitting in. One student said that the only student he could carry on a conversation with in his "lower-level" history class was another gifted student who also had made the questionable decision of taking the class instead of the AP class on the same subject. He took the class because he says, "I like free time." Now he is worried that he is not going to have the knowledge he should have on the topic when he goes to college.

## **Classmates**

### **Misbehavior**

At no point in nine interviews did any student mention misbehavior by a gifted student in a gifted classroom although student misbehavior was widely discussed and was considered a huge classroom problem. The students expressed that they quickly become upset with students who will not let the teacher teach, who interrupted the teacher, or who talked when they were not supposed to talk.

### **Gifted Classmates**

In every student interview the students discussed how much they value their gifted classmates. They see them as friends and learning partners or at least as learning partners. They want to be in classes with them and only them. They see the different learning styles and the different levels of ability among their gifted peers, but they still see that the gifted students they are in classes with share common goals, abilities, and behaviors. They feel as if their opinions are respected by their peers, and they respect the knowledge of their classmates. As one student said, "Everybody in a gifted class is smart." More than half of the students shared that they are the one their friends come to for help in a particular subject, and they honestly said that they know the gifted student to go to when they need help or explanation.

Some gifted students commented on how many friends they found when they took the gifted test and were labeled as gifted students. They speak of the acceptance they felt from other gifted students from the first day of class. Some of them explain that they had never had many friends until they found friends in gifted classes among other gifted students.

### **All Classmates**

When gifted students are in classes with those who are “normal” students, the gifted students feel as if the normal students resent them because they can learn the material much easier. The gifted students may or may not still have to work, but they usually do not have to work as long. They also are often the ones who earn the best grades. One gifted student thinks that the regular education students refer to her as “one of the gifted kids.” She feels that she is alienated from her classmates in this regular education classroom because she is gifted and is a member of the group of gifted students. Other gifted students are sometimes referred to by names that are not so nice.

One of the saddest situations any teacher will see is the child who wants to learn, but who struggles with even the most basic content. Those students can see the differences in themselves and in gifted students when they are in classes with them. They hear the praise coming from the teacher, see the outstanding products and projects presented, and hear the comments gifted students make in discussions. They can compare their school lives and the total lack of honors and recognition to the gifted student who may be the president of three clubs, the top student in the class, and who talks about college and scholarships as part of everyday conversation. How can this child not look at life and think that it is unfair? How can there not be resentment toward the gifted student who seems to have so much so easily? The consistent effort the gifted child gives to earn that success may not be visible. Only the results are there for comparison. Gifted students are often careful to be friendly toward other students so that they do not seem arrogant or as if they feel they are better. How can either child win in this situation unless there is a true friendship developed? Gifted students say that with other gifted students, conversations are rapid

and cover a lot of topics. With other students, they share that they slow their conversation down and add in more explanation. Even friendship is affected by the gifted mind.

### **Ability**

The ability levels in regular education classrooms are vast. Teachers struggle every day to find a workable and viable way to differentiate. The effort required to effectively differentiate can be Herculean. Unfortunately, when the classroom also holds gifted students, the differentiation piece gets much larger and more demanding. Gifted students are aggravated and even angered when they become little more than spectators in a regular education classroom. They know they have the ability to do much more. They feel that “regular” students often do not try to use even the ability they have. They believe that teachers constantly teach to the students who are just below average in an effort to raise them to average. Few situations dishearten a child who desires to learn, needs to learn, more than leaving a classroom with the same knowledge they brought with them when entering the classroom. Gifted students know how to do many activities well. They know how to create chaos in a classroom where they are being ignored. This behavior may not be admirable, and certainly it is not defensible. The teacher’s decision to ignore the gifted child is also not admirable and is not defensible. In this time of Lexile levels, any and every teacher must know that they have a responsibility to provide work on the appropriate level for all students.

### **Behavior**

Students who are gifted tend to like school and want to learn. Their behavior reflects these aspects of their personalities. When they are learning, they are generally well-behaved and happy. Students who do not like school and who do not like to learn often try to create barriers that prevent teaching and learning from taking place. They talk. They distract. They do not

follow directions. They are not prepared with prior knowledge or with supplies. They need to go somewhere. They need someone else to go somewhere. They ask questions not related to the topic being taught. The list of behaviors used to avoid a task, to avoid an adult's realization that they are unprepared or perhaps cannot read, to gain attention from adults or peers, or to avoid receiving attention from peers is lengthy and creative. Each one of those behaviors is probably an irritation to a gifted child or any child who values an education. Confrontation is a real possibility between the teacher and the misbehaving students and between the students in the classroom. Distraction is created. The gifted child and the students who want to learn lose. The misbehaving child does not win because learning is not the outcome, but this student does have success in forcing his or her will on everyone else in the classroom.

The success that students who do not want to learn have in preventing learning is aggravating to a gifted student. They feel that someone, either the teacher or an administrator, should take steps to either gain control of the student's behavior or remove the student from the classroom. They feel compassion for the student who misbehaves, for other students who have to be in many classes with misbehaving students, and for the teacher. Their sense of justice, though, says that school is a place for learning, and one student should not be able to prevent the learning of many students.

Gifted kids want to be in a classroom with other gifted students who want to behave and want to learn because they generally want to behave and want to learn. If their behavior is not what it should be, the teacher should examine the strategies being used and the level and relevance of the content being addressed. Gifted students love or at least like to learn, and they see the value in learning. They also know that it is detrimental to their future plans if they are not learning.

## **The Teacher**

### **The “Perfect” Teacher**

The first myth about gifted kids often heard when teachers and administrators gather is that gifted students do not need good teachers because they will learn on their own without competent guidance. This statement is misleading. Gifted students need great teachers. They need teachers who fully know and understand their contents, and who understand gifted students. Can gifted students learn without help? Usually, they can. Will they learn what they could and should learn if they have the guidance of an excellent teacher? Almost certainly, they will not. A common theme from the nine gifted students interviewed was that they want a classroom teacher who actually teaches the material he or she wants students to learn. Gifted students emphatically state that the teacher should not just assign work, distribute study sheets or notes, read a PowerPoint, depend on worksheets, and then give a test. They indicate that the teacher should introduce, explain, give examples, tell pertinent stories, and build relevance between the knowledge and future work in the content area or connect the knowledge to its potential contribution to a well-lived life.

### **Relationships**

Gifted students tend to be sensitive to the opinions and feelings of other people, just as they are sensitive to their own thoughts and feelings. In fact, intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness are two areas of giftedness, according to Gardner (1995). Relationships are extremely important to gifted students, and the relationship between a gifted student and his or her teacher is one that is treasured. They judge the quality of the relationship with the quality of time a teacher is willing to offer after school or between classes. Teachers who will stop working and moving about the room, look at them, and listen to them are those they feel care about them.

They want a teacher who is willing to help them with another class or another problem. Trust is a word heard often when gifted students talk about favorite and perfect teachers.

### **Content Knowledge**

Knowing content frees a teacher to move about the room, to ask questions, to go off-script in reaction to the comment of a student, and to be confident enough to take the learning to as deep a level as a student is capable of going. Lack of content does just the opposite. The teacher is locked to a podium, a desk, or a PowerPoint; questions are static and are thought through and put on the board before class ever begins; and only questions the teacher is prepared to answer are posed to students. The teacher tends to shut down learning conversations and does not use strategies where he or she does not directly control what is said in the classroom. Worksheets and busy work are often an outgrowth of a teacher's lack of content knowledge. Gifted students think deeply and question mercilessly. They need teachers who can provide thoughtful and correct answers almost immediately. Teachers who understand their content can ask questions and lead students to reach a depth of understanding that is satisfying to a gifted student. A teacher does not have to know everything about everything to teach the gifted, but it helps. Knowing a lot about the topic being discussed is practically essential. Gifted students feel they can trust that a teacher who knows his or her content is teaching them what they really need to know about the subject. They do not have the same trust in a teacher who cannot answer their questions.

Gifted kids like teachers who teach. They believe that not only should teachers know their content, but they should fully understand how to teach their content and show students how the content is relevant to their lives. According to the gifted students interviewed, teachers should also have an understanding of gifted students. This knowledge is not easily or quickly



obtained. The gifted are not uniform or universal. They are complex and confess that they may withhold information or insights that could promote better understanding of who they are and how they think and learn. They have a great variety of characteristics even among themselves. Learning to work with them is a challenge, and they understand that some teachers embrace the challenge and others avoid it.

Obviously, all teachers of all children should have a deep knowledge of content and the strategies necessary to teach that content. Gifted teachers have to be prepared to enable the thinking of the gifted student that may be critical, creative, analytical and holistic.

### **Love for Teaching**

When gifted students read their teachers, one notion clearly apparent to them is whether or not the teacher wants to be in the room with them. Teachers who seem down or who grumble about their jobs are not appreciated by gifted students and probably are not appreciated by any other student. Students are a big part of teaching. Teachers who like teaching seem also to like students. Gifted students, and probably all students, need to be liked, and maybe even need to be loved. The hours in the classroom matter. Gifted students want to learn from a teacher who wants to teach. They want their teachers to be excited about what they are teaching and about what they have planned for class each day. English teachers who introduce a novel, short story or article by telling what they love about it are more likely to be successful with the teaching of that text than those who begin the lesson with negative comments. Happiness and acceptance feed on each other in a classroom setting. This is particularly true of students who are pleased to be present.

### **Organization**

Grades are too important to a gifted student for them to enjoy surprises. A lack of organization and planning creates surprises for students. Gifted students want time to do well,

time to create, and time to study. They do not seek, though, to have every day be like the next, or to have a rigid weekly schedule of events. Gifted students want the freedom to explore deeply and to pursue a good idea or plan. They want planning to be around content, to be flexible enough to consider yesterday's conversation, and to be logical. They can analyze why a lesson is structured as it is, and they want to see that the thinking behind the teaching is reasonable and responsive.

### **Strategies and Activities**

Educators should try to design challenging assignments for students, particularly for those who are gifted. Most gifted students are happier when they face a challenge and are generally more likely to embrace the learning offered. They may be more willing to fully engage in not only completing the activity but also in doing more with the assignment than is required. They often go beyond the requirements of a project or product for the pleasure of seeing what they are capable of doing. They also may enjoy sharing their accomplishments with the teacher and with their classmates. Gifted students are like others in the sense that they need affirmation and acknowledgement for who they are and what they can do.

Challenging activities may be developed by offering the freedom to design the activity or by asking an open-ended question with the ability to decide how the knowledge gained will be presented. Challenging activities may also be structured. Telling a student to write ten paragraphs and indicating a particular characteristic of each paragraph that must be included or met is also challenging. Gifted students may have different levels of interest in structure and freedom. When possible teachers could allow students to choose whether they want to complete the assignment by following prescribed parameters or by determining their own parameters within which to show what they know.

## **Talking**

Talking is important to gifted students. Some see it as an outlet for a constantly churning brain; others see it as a major component of learning. Still others see it as a way of sharing what they are thinking both for the purpose of informing others and for seeking feedback, and a few see it as an aspect of their giftedness and the giftedness of others. When they describe themselves as energetic, they mean that they are talkative. They are not referring to movement around the room. They are speaking of fast-paced conversation, insightful commentary delivered without hesitation, and questions that constantly change and permeate throughout the classroom. One characteristic of the teacher they describe as the best to have is not only the one who provides the scenario for conversational learning and even allows the classroom to rock and roll while the conversation is taking place. The teacher that lights up their eyes when they talk about him or her is the one who is right there in the conversation with them.

Several components of this learning strategy have to be present before it will work well. The students have to be engaged, but they love this learning. Student engagement even at the deepest level is not a problem. The topic of conversation needs to be academic. The teacher is responsible for setting the scene and guiding the focus. Ten or so most important facts or issues of the topic need to have been presented quickly and in an interesting way to establish and connect to prior knowledge. Gifted students want the teacher to teach at some point in the class, especially if the idea or concept is new. They do not, however, want to be handed typed notes or listen to a teacher slowly plod through a PowerPoint. Note-taking strategies abound that work for gifted students, but thinking should be involved in the acquisition of knowledge process. The teacher should be able to move away from the podium and the day's prepared teaching notes. The teacher needs to have extensive knowledge of the topic, probably knowledge that is beyond

the knowledge required to meet the deepest relevance and rigor of the standards. Also needed for a good class conversation is a good question or two. Questioning is an art and a talent. A good rule of thumb is to follow the controversy, if controversy exists, and to look at the overall idea that a student needs to understand to have success in life or at least in the next class the next level up the educational ladder. Conceptual learning is the goal, but it needs to sit on a solid rack of factual understanding and working knowledge. Teachers should also post or find some creative way to share learning targets. These targets should be standards based, but not limited by the intended depth and rigor of the standards, if standards guide the teaching. They should be clear and brief, but gifted students want to know what they should learn. They can guide their learning and have ownership of their learning if they have a clear understanding of what they are expected to learn, what skills they should acquire, and how they will likely be assessed to show they have learned.

At some point in time, students should be taught how to listen attentively and to respond with respect. Disagreement, even strong disagreement, is not only acceptable but is desired. The important characteristics of disagreement in a class conversation are those of acceptance of the person if not the person's idea; honor for the right a person has to have a personal opinion; a tone that does not alienate, stifle, or intimidate another person; a willingness to learn; and the ability to let go and move on without insisting on repetition of ideas that have already been shared. Finer points of discussion student need and desire to know are how to ask questions that promote thinking and make commentary that is not judgmental while also does not express agreement. The power of the "hmmm" can be taught.

As a word of caution to a teacher or administrator, any time talking is involved in teaching and learning, a recap of the learning that has occurred is a necessary step of closure.

Primarily we share what we have learned from a lesson because reiteration helps a learner organize his or her thoughts and solidify the learning that has been gained. Hearing other opinions clearly stated may help a learner fill in gaps or add support to ideas gained. Stating what has been learned or summarizing learning so that other can see the thinking that has taken place and the conclusions that have been reached builds the trust a learning community has in its members and the value placed on each individual opinion. The teacher can do formative assessments during the sharing out process that can gauge individual success in answering the questions and meeting the learning targets.

Recapping learning is also a way for a student to see what has been learned. This prevents the comment, “We didn’t do anything in class today. We just talked.” Students, even gifted students often believe that classroom learning is a process that is stressful and even somewhat boring. When they enjoy what they are doing and are fully engaged in learning, they may not see that time as a time of learning when, actually, it is their time of greatest learning. The gifted students said clearly and repeatedly in the interviews that they learn from others. They like to learn with others. They like access to the expertise others have.

Recapping also gives administrators a chance to evaluate the quality of learning that takes place during a classroom conversation. Conversations in gifted classrooms may be wild events that involve several people speaking at once, while still honoring conversational protocol. Often three or four groups of students are talking, and then, with or without prompting, groups reach out to each other and talk through what each group has discovered. It can look and sound like chaos, but the teacher and the students are fully cognizant of what is taking place in every corner of the room. Gifted learners “talk, talk, talk,” as one gifted interviewee explained.

Class conversation should not be confused with a class discussion. They are completely different. Class conversation is a method of working together, sharing ideas, helping each other, and acquiring knowledge in a relaxed way. Academic class discussions are organized events that usually follow a prescribed plan, a seating order or arrangement, responsibility roles each student or group of students perform, and advanced preparation. These activities may include Socratic seminars, fishbowl activities, debates, discussion graphing, and a variety of other methods too numerous to list. Generally academic classroom discussions are based on a text, particularly in English classes. Gifted students enjoy classroom discussion because it includes listening and talking. In a gifted classroom, the discussion can be carried on by people with agile and informed minds, and the depth of thinking can be impressive. Students feel that academic class discussions prepare them for college and for life. They learn how to clearly state their ideas and to support them with sound reasoning and/or textual evidence. They learn the art of rebuttal, the difference in argument and persuasion, and the importance of knowing how much exposition is required and when too much exposition slows the discussion.

Classroom academic discussion has the same necessary components as classroom conversation in the sense of teacher preparation; student interaction; student participation; and learning targets, goals, and questions. It differs because it requires structure, preparation, and on the part of the students, constraint. It looks and sounds differently because while students are attempting to have a smooth exchange of comments and ideas, only one person should be talking, and everyone else in the classroom should be listening. Recapping activities are still important for the same reasons as were offered concerning classroom conversation.

While several gifted kids expressed a love for a free classroom atmosphere to promote learning, almost all of the students communicated a dislike for students who talk when the

teacher is teaching or when the students should be listening. Gifted students often may truly love learning. They want to participate in learning activities that work, and they want that participation to be full and uninterrupted. They like the freedom to do more, say more, and think deeper. They do not want any misbehavior in their classrooms, and do not tolerate well anyone who stand between them and their desire to know more.

### **Presentation**

Most gifted kids enjoy presenting their work and hearing the presentations of others. They enjoy learning from each other and hearing the perspectives that other intelligent people have. The problem solving process intrigues them, and they like to see how others approach solving a problem. Those who do not feel they are creative enjoyed working with students who they view as being creative and learning strategies for being creative from them. If they do not actually work together, they still enjoy seeing presentations where the thinking and learning involved is creatively presented.

### **Reading**

Some of the gifted love to read, and some literally despise it. They appreciate the fact that their teachers have assigned novels for them to study because they know they need the exposure to the author, the text itself, the genre, or the time period. Many generally read what is assigned which is not the case for all students. They have some contempt for those, among the gifted and otherwise, who do not read what is assigned by the teacher. They especially do not appreciate other students who do not read when a classroom discussion is planned around the text.

Gifted students can be avid readers of material that is not assigned. They read for entertainment and for escape. They list fiction, especially teen fiction, as being among their favorite books to read. Harry Potter is a favorite among the gifted as it is for many teenage

readers. They like series books. They often share books with each other if the other person is patient enough to wait for the book. They read pretty quickly and have no trouble comprehending what they read. They may also read about their interests and their passions. They are, in fact, likely to read journal articles, textbook chapters, or on-line websites discussing a topic that is highly interesting to them.

### **Writing**

Some gifted students love to write because they love expressing their opinions. Other students find writing to be a painful, solitary process. Some love to read a text and analyze it in a written assignment, and others think that is the worst of all assignments. Some want the teacher to assign a topic; others do not like to write about assigned topics. Some like a highly structured writing activity with intense teacher guidance, and others want to be told to write without any parameters at all. Some love a rubric because they know exactly what is expected to make a good grade, and some feel that nothing constricts their creativity and their thoughts as much as a rubric.

Writing is definitely one of those assignments where teachers can offer choices. Students may be offered the choice of working with a group or a partner of his or her choice to produce writing. Several topics may be offered with varying degrees of structure built in to the assignment. One choice teachers can offer to gifted students, and all students, is the right to argue a viewpoint in the middle of a pro and con argument. They often see both the merit and the fallacy of both sides of an argument. If they are allowed to determine and define a new right point of view, according to their opinions, and pulled from the pro and con views of others, they may offer new insight into the issue. They may need to be allowed to write based on how they may naturally think.



Rubrics are another contentious topic for gifted students. While rubrics somewhat protect them from surprises they do not like, most gifted students do not like the restrictions they place on the work they turn in. If a teacher plans to grade heavily or be “nit-picky” (a word that dropped several times into the conversation when students were discussing teachers) on a particular aspect of grammar or formatting, they want to know ahead of time so that they can be meticulous in their work on that section. They also feel that teachers rarely offer incentive for being more insightful or for deeper thinking when they design a rubric. One solution to this problem is to design a rubric that adds up to 90 to 95 points and leave the last 5 to 10 points to be earned for creativity, insight, effort, or brilliance. Often the gifted feel that the top end of their work in a class is not acknowledged, and all they have as incentive to do their personal best is the satisfaction of doing well, the positive feedback from peers, the teacher’s approval, and the knowledge they have gained.

### **Grammar**

Just like all students, some gifted students are good grammarians, and some are not. Some love studying grammar and applying what they have learned to what they write, and some do not. Grammar should be taught through writing. Grading the grammar in an essay and offering feedback on the student’s efforts is one true way to differentiate learning for every student in an English classroom, particularly for gifted students who may need more advanced and, perhaps, sophisticated grammar instruction.

Grading essays or even short writings can become onerous to a teacher and may simply be an impossible task to accomplish if writing is required in some assignment each day. Gifted students should write copiously. One way to help gifted students is to allow them to identify their weaknesses in grammar if they have any, and to grade and offer feedback on one or two of the

student's self-identified weaknesses using a layered rubric. Another method of grading using a rubric with gifted students is to let them self grade before they turn in the paper, marking the block in each category they feel best describes their work and writing a sentence of explanation for the points they assign themselves in each category. The teacher can agree with the student's assessment or adjust the grade the gifted student has indicated he or she should earn. Gifted students can be brutally honest when they self-grade.

### **Group Work**

Gifted students tend to enjoy group work if they are working with a group of students who have the same ability and the same work ethic. Some of them feel they always lead the group. Others would rather not lead unless they have to do so. Just as they enjoy learning through conversing with each other, they enjoy creating projects with a group when each member has an area of expertise. They feel as if they learn from each other and that their synergy works for them individually and as a whole group. They enjoy presenting what they have accomplished and seeing the presentations of others. When everyone works at a high level, they all learn more.

The gifted, do not, however enjoy working in groups with those who do not share their same level of ability, their need to make good grade, or their work ethic. Those students interviewed discussed students who offered to "color" or those who "worked the clicker" during a presentation. They do not like being assigned a group grade by the teacher because even though they do the great majority of the work, their grade is lower than if they worked alone, due to the influence of the less capable members, and the less capable members have higher grades due to the unfairly heavy load carried by the gifted student.

Gifted students believe that teachers assign “mixed groups” because they are trying to help students who struggle, but they do not feel that those who struggle do enough to learn more. They just believe that they are used and gain less knowledge than if they had been allowed to work alone. Gifted students are not tutors, nor should they be doing the work of the teacher. Their responsibility as a student is to learn. The teacher’s responsibility is to teach. At no point in time in a classroom should a student function as a tutor or teacher, unless the student asks to help when their passion is teaching.

### **Assessments**

One aspect of assessments that gifted students agree about is that they do not like, or even they perhaps hate true-false tests. Several students explained that they go through them word by word because one word can make them right or wrong. In studying them so closely, they overthink and end up choosing the wrong answer. One student explained that she chose the wrong answer even when she was pretty sure the other one was right. Multiple choice questions were more of a favorite method of being assessed, though one student said that with both true-false and multiple choice questions, a student can know the right answer and still get them wrong. Though fill-in-the-blanks were not a favorite method of assessment, the gifted feel as if they do well with them because all you have to do is know the right answer. Some students despise essay questions or writing an essay as forms of assessment. Other students loved the freedom of being able to write what they know in their own words. Projects were a favorite type of assessment if they were completed alone or in a group with members of like ability.

Students like to be fairly assessed in ways that allow them to express all they know. They do not want a teacher to use a standardized test or a test found in a book or on-line. The tests do not usually assess what was actually taught by the teacher in the classroom, and they tend to be

written for average ability students. On-line tests also often have the answers on-line. Students just go on-line and find the answers, so cheating becomes a problem.

### **The Classroom**

Like most students, gifted students notice what a classroom looks like. They spend much time in their classes over the course of a semester or a year. Most gifted students say that a classroom is a reflection of the way a teacher approaches the subject and students, so they spend time evaluating the classroom for clues to the thinking and expectations of the teacher.

#### **Seating**

Gifted students relate their styles of learning with their seating preferences. Students who like to learn alone, work alone, and like a quiet learning environment prefer rows. A desk becomes a private sanctuary when all desks are arranged in rows. Students who are shy often sit in the back of the room or to the side if the seating is set up in rows. Students who want to hear every word spoken by the teacher sit in the front and may want the front-row, middle seat. Students who like to talk seek the middle seat or the one behind it in the middle row. Gifted students, even those who are shy, want to see the countenance of any person who is speaking. They use the non-verbal body language of the speaker to gauge how much the speaker believes what he or she is saying, the confidence they have in the accuracy of their thinking, and the type of response they are seeking.

Students who enjoy group work and interacting with others generally like sitting in pods. They like a more random classroom order with a greater degree of movement. Those who enjoy learning through learning conversations and academic discussions love sitting in a circle or a semicircle. They feel that teachers who use that arrangement are signaling that every student's input and opinion is important. They also like that they can see everyone's expressions, and

everyone can see them. Students who are shy like these arrangements least because they feel that they are sitting on a stage, and everyone can see them. Students who love conversation and whole class interaction like rows least. Some teachers solve this problem of multiple preferences by setting up a couple of groups, a row or two, and a semicircle when arranging the desks in their rooms. The seating arrangement creates feelings of great angst and discomfort or feelings of homecoming and belonging in students. Some enjoy a constant change, and change for some is stressful. Clues to the day's lessons and the teacher's intentions can be read in the seating arrangement, according to the gifted students who participated in the interviews. Clues of the student's intended level of participation and comfort in being a member of the class can be read in the seats they choose in the arranged seating. Assigned seating tends to be an affront to gifted students unless they need help in moving away from a loud student who is distracting.

### **Regular Education Classes**

Gifted student admit the struggle to find their place in regular education classes. They feel that the expectations are high for them beyond what is reasonable from both other students and the teacher. They believe that teachers who do not teach the gifted treat them differently than teachers who do teach the gifted. Regular education teachers treat them almost as though they are older and do not expect them to follow the class rules as closely as other students. They allow them privileges such as leaving the classroom to go ask another teacher a question or going to the media center or computer lab to work on a project. Their gifted teachers expect more from them because they know what they are capable of doing and know that they can insist that they do their best.

The gifted admit that teachers who are either not gifted themselves or who are not trained to work with the gifted have little or no understanding of them. They have a hard time finding the right way to talk to a person who has no concept of how a gifted person thinks or learns.

### **Appearance**

As with most subjects, gifted students have opinions about what makes a classroom feel welcoming. They like student art on the wall and lights that can be turned on to replace standard fluorescent ceiling lights. The art can be the art of previous students or just appealing pictures. The lighting can be from lamps or even strings of white lights. The walls should not be crowded with posters, but they also should not be bare. The room needs color, but not such heavy blasts of color that they cause anxiety, power-surges or headaches.

### **Safety**

Physical safety is left to administrators in the opinions of some gifted students. They feel safe when teachers lock their doors during each class period and when the doors to the school are locked. I found it interesting that no student mentioned armed school safety officers which are present in each school where I interviewed students. Students also mentioned that they feel safer with a teacher who can control the class than with those who cannot. They generally feel safer in gifted classrooms than in regular education classes because they know their classmates better and feel as if they can trust them to behave well.

Safety was also mentioned when students discussed conversations and discussions. Teachers may need to filter the responses and feedback given to comments made by gifted students, just as they would with students of lesser ability. Gifted students express that they are sensitive to being judged; to appearing silly; or to sounding wrong, not smart, or unlearned. The gifted need reassurance even though they are capable. They may not like the idea of failing

because they expect and others expect them to succeed. Gifted students feel safe when they feel a teacher welcomes their questions, listens to what they say, and carefully responds to them in ways that will not embarrass them. They do not mind being challenged, but they want the challenge to come with a smile rather than with a “got you” attitude. Even if they work hard to trip up a teacher, and they sometimes do if the teacher enjoys that type of friendly defiance, they rarely enjoy having the teacher trip them up in the resulting animated and anger-free argument. Gifted kids tend to love an argument, and they will work hard to win. The adults involved and the other gifted students involved have to remember that though the person arguing aggressively is exceptionally bright and may be, in terms of advanced thinking, as accomplished or more accomplished than many adults, the heart and emotional age probably belong to a teenaged child.

## **Challenges**

### **Stereotypes**

Gifted students feel that they almost daily wrestle the stereotypes that others hold of them. Interestingly, they feel the aggravation and often the hurt caused by unreasonable and untrue expectations regardless of their own gender, race, heritage, home town, or the area in which they live and the friends they have. These primary stereotypes are that gifted student know everything without having to work hard to learn, and that gifted students are always well behaved. Other stereotypes include that they stay home and read and study; they are nerdy.

### **Social Media**

Most gifted students are careful about what they post on social media. They feel that the further they get from middle school and ninth grade, the less they are involved in the drama created by social media. They do want what they post to be well-received by others. The image they most mention wanting to portray is that of an active, normal teenager. They are happy for

the opportunity to post a picture of a time when they are involved in a normal, teenage activity. Some gifted students have had bad experiences with social media, and the hurt lingers from what was said to them concerning what was a difficult time.

## **Grades**

Most gifted students have strong opinions about grades. Of the nine students interviewed, eight of them view grades as highly important because they want to attend a good college. Several mentioned scholarship possibilities that require excellent grades. One student who plans to possibly enter the military is happy with passing grades, but is happier with higher grades. Students generally like teachers who are careful with their grades. They want to know when a teacher is planning to give a test in time for them to study. Some want a rubric to follow if the teacher plans to be picky. Most of the time, they want to learn together and be graded alone. They want no other student to affect their grades through behavior that is distracting or group work that is not excellent. Gifted students often feel that a test is too easy. They evaluate the quality of the material they are learning, and they want their tests to match the importance of the material. They want to be assessed fairly and thoroughly, they do not appreciate a test that does not give the opportunity to show what has been learned. They do not like people who cheat to have better grades than they. They want teachers to grade in a timely matter, and they usually know on any given day what their averages are in every class.

Grades are indicators of knowledge. Gifted students feel they are expected to know so much. They also believe that other students expect them to always do well, or even best, on a test. The expectations add pressure to do well. If the gifted make a poor grade, people question them about how they could do so poorly. Their grades can be a major news event in the classroom, if the grade is not a good grade. Teachers should be careful about respecting the



privacy of all students when grades are involved, but teachers sometimes forget that perhaps a gifted student does not want his or her grade to be announced to the class. The gifted also explain that other students may not understand arguing over one point or five. Other gifted students know how insulted someone can feel when a teacher takes points from an answer. Regular education students may think that arguing about a 95 is silly.

Students need to understand the value in doing any work assigned to them. The value in learning and making a grade should outweigh the time it takes to complete the task. Gifted students have a very clear idea of how much time should be spent for gains in knowledge and grades. When the time is too long, the knowledge is too little or too shallow, or the grade is weighted too lightly or too heavily, they are not happy with the task, and they are usually not happy with the teacher. Teachers should not shrug away this unhappiness. Good teachers design tasks with time and assessments in mind.

### **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder**

Students who have ADHD struggle to focus in a classroom. Gifted students with ADHD can still find a way to focus, but they have a difficult time discovering how to be quiet or to stay seated. Clicking pens, swinging legs, bouncing in place, happy feet, doodling, writing down the states and capitals or doing another challenging task, counting, reading, rocking, and sleeping are all ways gifted students try to cope with ADHD.

### **The Gifted Brain**

Students who have a gifted brain describe it as always thinking, as constantly analyzing, as never stopping, as always questioning, as never forgetting, or as never slowing down. While the results in terms of learning are excellent, living with a brain that does not rest is not always easy. Gifted students enjoy each other's company because the thinking never slows; the

conversation does not lag. The possibilities for having a new idea and following it to points of interest are almost endless. If students cannot force their own brains to relax, surely teachers need to understand that they cannot dictate or control the thinking that does or does not take place concerning any issue or topic. Gifted students want to make one more comment because they have one more new idea to share or question. They have a difficult time leaving a topic or leaving a task because their minds are still exploring the issue or manipulating the task. Transitions from one task to another need to be particularly smooth and interesting in a classroom where gifted students are working. Otherwise, the gifted student will probably stay focused on the previous part of the lesson or the former task.

### **Afraid to be Wrong**

Gifted students often are reluctant to try because they are afraid to be wrong or are afraid of failure. They believe that they are not allowed to be wrong and still maintain their gifted status in the eyes of the people around them. They are some of the most capable people in any school setting, but they may not be the student who turns in an essay for an essay competition, who tries out for All State Band or Chorus, who runs for a club office or as a class officer, or who wants to try out for the debate team. They may be the student who decides not to take the Advanced Placement exam at the end of the year.

In a classroom setting they need to feel as if what they are going to contribute is going to be accepted and not be judged. They feel that teachers set the standard for what is allowed in reaction to what anyone says. They also like to be with other gifted students who feel as they feel. They know that other gifted students understand that a gifted person does not know all, can be wrong, and wants to speak aloud and offer half-formed ideas for the group to explore. They

feel that regular education students and perhaps the teachers that only teach regular education expect all they say to have at least a particle of brilliance included somewhere.

### **Busy Work**

Little aggravates a gifted student more than busy work. Unfortunately, they feel as if they have had to do plenty of it on their way to a full schedule of gifted classes with gifted peers where the work assigned has merit. They define busy work as any work they have to do when they already know the material, as work that is assigned for the sake of giving them an assignment to occupy their time, and homework that does not help them learn. Some have reached the point where they refuse to do busy work if they can make that refusal and still maintain a good grade. They unfortunately may shift their dislike for busy work to the teacher who assigns it.

Gifted students feel as if they pack their days with athletics, important school work, clubs, church activities, and volunteer work. In their persistent efforts to turn themselves into the kind of well-rounded and brilliant student good colleges seem to be seeking, they have no time to do work that offers them no gain and consumes their time. What they have very little of, is time.

### **Unfair Assignments**

One situation that is even worse than busy work to a gifted student is work that is unfair. Gifted students should be given a pretest at the beginning of each new unit, chapter, or major lesson. If the student does well on the test, making usually an 80 or above, the student should not be required to work through the material with the class. The student should be given the option of extending the work of the lesson by completing a project that holds personal merit and interest, moving to another project that is related to the student's passion, or working on a contract and completing other work a student wants to do. Under practically no circumstances

should the student be made to do the work everyone else is doing and then when finishing early, being required to do extra work, too. Grading for gifted students should be fair. What is offered as extra credit for other students should be offered as extra credit for gifted students if the gifted students are doing the same work as the rest of the class. If a gifted child is in a pull out program for gifted students, the gifted student should not be required to do the work completed in class while the student is in the gifted pull out program. A major factor of gifted students refusing gifted services is the fact that they are required to do what they describe as being “twice the work” other students have to do.

### **Normal Teenager**

The idea of gifted students wanting to seem normal to the stated, “you,” “some people,” “ya’ll,” “them,” and “they,” indicated that however some of them view themselves, they feel they are different from those who are not gifted and from those who are “normal.” Throughout the interviews the students were carefully kind. They were not disparaging of other students, though they did express their own despair of how they think they are viewed by “regular” students. They spoke of how they did not fit in to the regular education classrooms. They wanted to project the image of a “normal teenager” on social media. They did not understand the behavior of “those” students who are aggressive toward teachers. They were hurt by students who said “you aren’t smart enough,” and they were equally hurt by students who said they were “too smart.” Words like “nerdy,” “smarty-pants,” and “freak,” were painful when coming from other students.

These students have an enormous appreciation for and a sense of overwhelming relief to have found their peer group of other gifted students. They were almost giddy when they spoke of their friends and classmates. They expressed how much pleasure they found in sharing ideas,

thinking together, swapping feedback, and learning together in a setting designed to help them learn. They were quick to point out even then, though, that they usually want to take what they have learned about together and create an individual project. Not one student had a negative word to say about his or her AP English or honors English teachers, and they talked about teachers they had since 9<sup>th</sup> grade. They, in fact, had nothing but positive comments about any of the teachers who had taught them in gifted honors or AP classes in any content area.

### **Why Do We Care?**

The nine students who were interviewed are gifted students who have survived the trials and perks of being gifted to reach a time, places, and circumstances where they can thrive. They work well within the systems that now serve them, and from their perspectives, seem to serve them well. The answers that each student shared are a reflection of their own awareness of their perseverance and its resulting successes. These students have indicated their appreciation for their teachers. They acknowledged their ongoing analysis of the relationships they have with others and the relationships that others choose to have with them. They see their giftedness as an asset that promotes academic success and deeply contributes to their understandings of the world and their abilities to problem solve in it. Their successes may have shaded their answers with optimism and a contentment that could be perceived as self-satisfaction and self-approval.

Other gifted students have not found that same contentment in a school setting. Those who have dropped out of the gifted program or of school would likely not have the same euphoria about their futures in colleges and in careers and may not have found the members of their personal learning communities. If another subset of gifted teenagers could be interviewed, their answers could reflect their frustrations, their challenges in coping with their differences, and their lack of success in school, social situations, and in reaching personal goals.

Gifted students are not all the same. They are like any other population of students. Some like school and are good at finding ways to succeed there. Some despise school, though they may love learning, and have found only discontent while in a school setting. The interviews give insight into the school lives and some of the social lives of nine students. Their voices have been heard. They were offered a platform, a microphone, and a chance to tell their stories. Every student's voice is just as poignant as the nine student voices that lifted and lilted in this study. The greater the variety of the circumstances in the lives of the students, the more is there that can be learned about their needs. If students who are earning degrees in CTAE are interviewed, we may discover that they, too, feel passionate about their subjects. Their programs are vitally important to them. Students who are not gifted may feel that being put in classes with gifted students where the pace of learning is rapid and the content is advanced would be the last situation they would want to face on a daily basis. We need to ask every student how they learn best. We need to listen to every student's perceptions of school and how the systems, protocols, rules, expectations, goals, and practices in schools work or do not work for them.

Gifted students face a specific set of challenges with a specific set of attributes that make them different. Being different is okay. In fact, being different is often celebrated and, in many cases, is protected. We know that in education, student differences are supported through changes in a mainstream curriculum. For the gifted, those changes may lead to answers in interviews that indicate full engagement in learning, a love for schooling, confidence in meeting goals, and a positive sense of self. The changes may lead to students with happy voices.

Why do we need to know and understand gifted students? Why do we need to meet their academic needs? They potentially can help all of us by adding a body of creative work and contributions to our human library of knowledge. Possible they are the only ones who can add

that knowledge without having to wait long years for it to more slowly evolve. Disregarding their potential contributions to the world's population, as educators, we need to look at each one as an individual student whose academic, social, and emotional needs either are or are not being met.

Should the gifted student be in a classroom that serves that child through advanced content, broad boundaries, an informed and trained teacher, face-paced learning, and strategies that are appropriate to his or her ability and learning style? The answer can only be "yes." Those who want to recognize the humanity of every child and education's responsibility to meet the academic needs of every child will ask, "should this child be in a classroom that serves that child through content as advanced as he or she can maneuver through, an informed teacher trained to work with children of this child's needs and abilities, learning paced as fast as it can go and allow acquisition of knowledge and skills, and strategies that are appropriate to the student's ability and learning style? The answer can only be "yes." Unfortunately, while many students are being served in classes that meet their needs, many gifted students are sitting in the same classrooms watching the educational process work for others while it sadly, unfairly, and painfully fails each one of them.

The call for action is twofold. Educators need to learn to recognize the gifted child that does not meet the stereotypes of being well-behaved, high-performing, and probably of European descent. They need to see the potential of the most difficult child who is bored and of the child who has not been taught what he or she could have, but who could rapidly learn and excel if given the chance. They need to assess the potential of the child who may not have the English language skills to convey his or her intelligence, but the high intelligence is there. They should look closely at the child who comes from a poor home, wears dirty clothing, and has parents nobody in the school knows, but who perks up when it is time to do math and always seems to

have a question. Teachers and administrators need to quite thinking that the fact that a child is gifted is going to show up in the gradebook, in conversation by the pool at the country club, and in the folded hands sitting quietly on the desk, ready to accept the next assigned task. As educators we need to be highly proactive in seeking out the gifted child who both needs us and a peer group of like-ability friends.

The second part of the call to action is to make room for gifted students in our schools. Give them classrooms, trained teachers, and a curriculum that challenges them. Give them understanding, guidance, supplies, equipment, encouragement, acceptance, and the right to be who they are without yoking them with conversations that include words like normal, regular, special, labeled, white privilege, acting white, traitor, nerd, extension, and accommodations. They are students. They are children. They did not create or mismanage any gifted program up to this point in time. They are who they are through no choice or culpability of their own. They should not be penalized for being whom and what they are, for how and why they learn, or for the potential and ability they have that is different from others. They should be celebrated as the interesting and unique people they are. They matter because they are students. They are no more important than any other student, but neither are they any less important than any other student. When a decision is made not to serve them in favor of serving others, that is not a fair decision, and it is not one that should be supported in any community. Gifted students need to be taught in ways they can learn.



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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Characteristics of Self

1. How do you describe yourself in “self talk”?
2. When do you decide to do your best or at least “pretty good” work? (What motivates you?) (When you decide not to do your best or at least okay work what backs that decision?)
3. Why do you come to school? Give me your deepest answer.
4. What does feeling safe in a classroom mean to you?
5. What are the characteristics of your personality as a gifted person that affect the way you like to learn?
6. How important are grades to you? Why?
7. Describe what you see as the importance of communication- speaking, writing, and non-verbal? (How important is learning what is taught in English classes to you?)
8. How do you want to be perceived by others face-to-face?
9. How do you want to be perceived by others on social media?
10. Where do you feel safe enough or confident enough to express your real opinions? To show your real self?
11. Have you ever pretended to be less smart than you are? Why?
12. How important is imagination to you?
13. Who do you want to please? To anger? To protect? To not disappoint? To approve of you?

14. To what extent does being gifted affect the degree of respect you receive in your classroom?
15. How honest do you want to be in a discussion about your feelings? Your opinions? Your world views? Why?
16. To what extent do you look forward to going into your English classroom?

#### Characteristics of Classmates

17. For your gifted classmates, what characteristics do they have that affect the way they like to learn?
18. Do you think that you and other people are successful in developing the on-line personality that they want to develop? Can you explain?
19. Is bullying a problem face-to-face? On social media? In your classes? How big of a problem is this?
20. To what extent do you feel that your classmates seek to hear your academic views (including opinions, perspectives, knowledge) in your English classroom?
21. To what extent do you feel that your views are respected by your classmates?
22. To what extent do factors outside of the classroom contribute to the environment of your classroom and interaction among your classmates?

#### Characteristics of Activities and Strategies

23. In your English class, what lessons or activities do you particularly like? Why?
24. Which activities or lessons do you particularly dislike? Why?
25. How important is classroom discussion to you?



26. What topics of discussion interest you?
27. How do you feel about working in groups? Helping others?
28. In what ways do you like to be assessed?
29. What methods of assessment give the most accurate accounting of what you have learned and what you know?
30. Which activities or lessons make you feel emotionally safe? Which ones do not?
31. Have you had explicit lessons about how to communicate and share views in your classroom?
32. Do classroom conversations span multiple classes? (Are you provided the opportunity to revisit a conversation?)
33. How often are your ideas shared with an audience? If you worked on a project or paper, do you have the opportunity to discuss and share your findings, observations, and growth as a student or as a person?

#### Characteristics of Teacher

34. Describe what, to you, would be the perfect teacher. Why?
35. What characteristics of teachers make you want to learn from them? What characteristics make you want to shut down? (Content knowledge, intelligence, personality, etc.)
36. Describe the relationship between the “perfect” or at least a “good” teacher and yourself.
37. In what ways does your teacher make you feel emotionally safe? What things can teachers do that make you not feel safe?
38. To what extent do you feel that your teacher seeks to hear your academic views (including opinions, perspectives, knowledge) in your English classroom?

39. To what extent do you feel that your views are respected by your English teacher?

40. How should bullying be handled?

#### Characteristics of Classroom

41. How do you like to “sit” in class? (Seating arrangement)

42. Describe a great atmosphere in which to learn.

43. How important is it for teachers and students to be able to look critically at many issues, seeing and discussing both positive and negative? Theories?

#### *Currere*

44. (Think of Past) In the past, describe the extent to which your English classroom has been a place where you feel emotionally safe. Include aspects of the classroom like the way it is set up, the teacher, the activities, and your classmates.

45. (Dream of Future) If you could design a classroom, how you would make it a place where you feel emotionally safe?

46. (Evaluate the Present through the Past and Future) What is different about your past classrooms, your dream classroom and your classroom of today?

47. (Choose What Should Be) Which classroom is better and why?



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### MINOR'S ASSENT

Hello,

I am Patty Bradshaw, a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University, and I am conducting a study entitled *Creating Spaces for Imaginative Engagement for Gifted High School Honors and Advanced Placement English Students*. I was a teacher for more than 30 years. I taught high school English to gifted students. I am now working in a position where I provide professional development to other English teachers. The main focus of my doctoral research is to help schools support students like you in becoming effective communicators. Your participation in this study can help teachers improve the classroom environment for gifted students like you.

You are being asked to volunteer to participate in a project that I will use to learn about students' insights regarding the classroom. I will ask a few of you who volunteer to participate. If you agree and are asked to participate in the project, you will complete an interview with me. In the interview, I will ask you questions about your classroom environment. These questions will ask you to reflect about your teacher, your peers, your classroom set-up, and classroom learning activities. I will record the audio of our interview so I can go back and review your answers. I will not share this recording with anyone other than my advisors at Georgia Southern. I will analyze data from all of the interviews I conduct to see what themes about safe classroom environments emerge. My goal is to share my findings with researchers in my field and the teachers with whom I work to help improve classroom environments. The interview will take one hour or less.

You do not have to participate in this project. You can stop participating whenever you want. If you do not want to answer one or more of the questions, it is okay. There will be no negative consequences for not wanting to participate or for wanting to stop participating in the middle of the interview. You can refuse to do the project even if your parents have given permission for you to participate.

None of the teachers or other people at your school will see the answers to the questions that I ask you. All of the answers that you give me will be kept in a locked cabinet, and only I and my advisors will see your answers. We are not going to put your name on the answers that you give us, so no one will be able to know which answers were yours.

If you understand the information above and want to do the project, please sign your name on the line below:

**Yes, I will participate in this project:** \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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



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**PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT**

Dear Parent or Guardian:

I will be conducting a study at your child's school in the next few weeks that is entitled "Creating Spaces for Imaginative Engagement for Gifted High School Honors and Advanced Placement English Students." I was a teacher for more than 30 years and am now working in a position where I provide professional development to other teachers. I am also working on completing my doctorate degree in Curriculum Studies at Georgia Southern University. The main focus of my doctoral research is to help schools support students in developing as effective communicators. Your child's participation in this study can help me help other teachers make classrooms safer spaces for learning for gifted children like yours.

The purpose of the study I will be conducting at your child's school is to determine what characteristics of your child's classroom make him or her feel safe when expressing ideas, opinions and knowledge. In particular, I will be asking students to describe learning activities, teacher actions, and peer actions that promote or inhibit your child's expression of himself or herself.

If you give permission, your child will have the opportunity to participate in an interview. I will conduct the interview at your child's school. I will record audio of our conversation using a tablet in order to have an audio record of our conversation to analyze. When I analyze the data, I will look for major themes that students share. I will write results from this study to share with researchers in professional journals, and I will also use results from this study in my everyday work with teachers. Your child will need no more than one and one-half hours to participate in this study.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. The risks from participating in this study are minimal. I have taught gifted students for more than twenty-five years. The only risk is that your child may experience some anxiety from talking to a researcher about his or her experiences. I will explain to your child that he or she may stop participating at any time without any penalty. Your child may choose to not answer any question(s) he/she does not wish to for any reason. Your child may refuse to participate even if you agree to her or his participation. No compensation for participating in the study will be offered.

In order to protect the confidentiality of the child, a number and a pseudonym instead of your child's real name will appear on all of the information recorded during the experiment. All information pertaining to the study will be kept in a locked file. No one at your child's school will see the information recorded about your child.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study at any time, please feel free to contact Patty Bradshaw, Curriculum Studies doctoral candidate, at 706-466-9996, or Dr. Robert Lake, advisor, at 912-478-0355.

To contact the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs for answers to questions about the rights of research participants please email [IRB@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:IRB@georgiasouthern.edu) or call (912) 478-5465.

If you are giving permission for your child to participate in the experiment, please sign the form below and return it to your child's teacher as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your time.

Patty Bradshaw, Ed. S.  
Curriculum Studies, Doctoral Candidate

Dr. Robert Lake  
Associate Professor of Curriculum,  
Foundations and Reading

Investigator's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent or Guardian's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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

IRB Tracking number: H17009



Date

Principal Name  
Address of School

Dear Mrs. Bradshaw,

I understand you are a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University and are conducting a study entitled *Creating Spaces for Imaginative Engagement for Gifted High School Honors and Advanced Placement English Students*. For this study, you have my permission to interview gifted and Advanced Placement English students at our high school. I will provide a classroom or other space for you to safely conduct and record the interview. I understand that students give their assent as well as have parental and teacher consent to participate. I understand the interviews will take place during normal classroom hours or immediately after school. Thank you for your efforts to improve the classroom environment for gifted students.

Sincerely,

Principal Name  
School Name



You are being asked to volunteer to participate in a project that Patty Bradshaw will use to learn about students' insights regarding the classroom. Mrs. Bradshaw is a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University. She is completing a study for her dissertation entitled *Creating Spaces for Imaginative Engagement for Gifted High School Honors and Advanced Placement English Students*. Mrs. Bradshaw was a teacher for more than 30 years. She taught high school English to gifted students. She now provides professional development for teachers. The main focus of her doctoral research is to help schools support gifted and Advanced Placement students in becoming effective communicators. Student participation in her study is critical to learn more about how students perceive interactions and activities in their classes. By participating in this study, you can help Mrs. Bradshaw's research to help other teachers improve the classroom environment for gifted students like you.

To participate in the study, you will complete an interview with Mrs. Bradshaw. She will ask you about your experiences in the classroom. The interview will take no longer than an hour. You won't receive any incentives to participate, but for those of you who are interested in possibly completing a graduate degree after college, participating in the interview will give you an experience in participating in research.

I am going to pass out two forms. The first form is for your assent to participate. If you are willing to help Mrs. Bradshaw with her study, fill out this form to volunteer to participate.

The second form is for parental consent. To be able to participate, Mrs. Bradshaw also needs your parent's consent which they can give by signing this form.

Once you have signatures for both forms, please return the forms to me, and I will return the forms to Mrs. Bradshaw.

Mrs. Bradshaw would love to talk to each and every one of you. She's spent her career teaching and interacting with students like you! However for her research, she needs to focus on a small set of interviews. She is going to interview up to 15 students across 5 different schools. So within our class, she probably will select 1-3 students to talk with.

The forms I am passing out have more information about the details of the study. They also have information for contacting Mrs. Bradshaw directly. If you or your parents have any questions, please feel free to contact Mrs. Bradshaw. She told me to tell everyone who volunteers thank you very much for helping her with her research.

