

Spring 2008

# Exploring Teachers' Beliefs about the Underrepresentation of Minority Students in the Gifted Program in a Mid-Sized Suburban School District in Georgia

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EXPLORING TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE  
UNDERREPRESENTATION OF MINORITY  
STUDENTS IN THE GIFTED PROGRAM IN A MID-  
SIZED SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT IN GEORGIA

by

PAMELA H. COLVIN

(Under the Direction of Linda M. Arthur)

ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, the national numbers of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from diverse backgrounds has nearly doubled. Based on the enrollment count in 2005, the state of Georgia experienced a similar change as minority students became the majority in Georgia's public schools. Even though this has occurred, the total statewide number of minority students enrolled in the gifted program and the number of minority students enrolled in the gifted program in some school districts in Georgia is not representative of this diversity.

The underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a concern voiced in research and shown through data at the state and district level. Research cites the use of standardized testing for determining giftedness, the lack of minority parental partnership between the home and school, and teachers' low expectations resulting in failure to recognize giftedness in minority students as reasons for underrepresentation.

This researcher conducted a qualitative study with eight purposively selected teachers, African-American and Caucasian teachers, with varied experience and amounts

of gifted training to explore teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program in a small suburban school district in Georgia. The fundamental beliefs held by these eight classroom teachers are varied and insightful, and several conclusions can be drawn. Teachers believe that (1) the current testing procedures for determining gifted eligibility are flawed, (2) teachers can offer creative solutions to schools and districts for addressing underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, (3) there is a lack of understanding of giftedness by most teachers, and this has a direct effect on the representation of minority students in the gifted program, (4) intelligence is dynamic, ever-changing nature, and the potential for giftedness is present in many students, (5) the lack of parent advocacy and building partnerships with the community is a factor in the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs, (6) the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program must be reversed; however, most teachers do not see themselves as a factor in the problem.

**INDEX WORDS:** Defining giftedness, Gifted eligibility, Gifted program, Identification process, Minority students, Parent advocacy, Parent partnerships, Standardized testing, Teacher expectations, Teachers' beliefs, and Underrepresentation of minority students

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2008

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Electronic Version Approved:  
May 2008

## DEDICATION

Words can not express the love and appreciation I feel for the support given to me by so many through this entire, amazing journey. To my husband, Tommy, thank you for supporting and loving me through this long process. We did it together, like we have so many other things. I could not have done it without you. To my mother, thank you for hugging me and encouraging me all the way. To my children, Rob, David, and Leslie, I love you. Mom finally finished!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr. Linda Arthur, Dr. Barbara Mallory, and Dr. Ababayehu Tekleselassie, you are my dream team! Thank you for your guidance, patience, and support of me throughout this incredible adventure. Reaching the end is a glorious feeling.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	7
LIST OF TABLES .....	11
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	12
Introduction .....	12
Background of the Study.....	14
Statement of the Problem .....	25
Research Questions .....	27
Significance of the Study .....	28
Research Procedures .....	29
Limitations.....	31
Delimitations .....	31
Definition of Terms.....	32
Summary .....	35
2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	38
Introduction .....	38
Definition of Giftedness .....	38
Identification Process for Gifted Programs .....	41
Parental Partnership, Advocacy, and Community Connections.....	50
Teachers' Beliefs and Expectations .....	62

	Summary .....	79
3	METHODOLOGY .....	82
	Introduction .....	82
	Research Questions .....	85
	Research Design .....	85
	Participants .....	86
	Instrumentation .....	87
	Data Collection .....	89
	Data Analysis .....	90
	Reporting the Data .....	91
	Summary .....	91
4	DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS .....	94
	Introduction .....	94
	Research Questions .....	96
	Research Design .....	97
	Demographic Profile of the Respondents .....	99
	Findings .....	99
	Summary .....	111
5	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS .....	114
	Summary .....	114
	Analysis of Research Findings .....	117
	Discussion of Research Findings .....	119
	Conclusions .....	129

Implications .....	132
Recommendations.....	134
Dissemination .....	135
Concluding Thoughts .....	135
REFERENCES.....	136
APPENDICES	
A INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCHER’S INITIAL DRAFT .....	154
B INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCHER’S FINAL DRAFT .....	156
C GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES & SPONSORED PROGRAMS.....	158

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Eligibility Criteria for Gifted Placement as Stipulated by Georgia State Regulations.....	20
Table 2: Descriptions of the Four Selected Schools.....	98
Table 3: Descriptions of the Eight Respondents.....	100

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

“We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy” (Delpit, 2006, p. 46).

On January 8, 2002, a historic piece of educational legislation, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, was signed into law by President George W. Bush (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). This event brought about change to public school education in America by increasing the attention given to the representation of diverse populations of its students. Within a few short years of this legislation, the U.S. Census Bureau published figures illustrating the changing diversity of student enrollment in the United States. Over the past 30 years, the numbers of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from diverse backgrounds has nearly doubled. At the end of 2004 the percentage of students from diverse backgrounds had risen to 43% from the 1972 level of 22% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). The American educational system entered a century of change.

The state of Georgia experienced a similar change in the landscape of public school education. In October 2005, Georgia had its first student enrollment count in which the state was noted as being a majority-minority public school system. Minority students were now in the majority in Georgia’s public schools, bringing an increase in the attention given to the student academic achievement gap and rates of academic improvement among minority students (Johnson, 2006). Even though students from

diverse backgrounds are now in the majority, the total number of students from diverse backgrounds enrolled in the gifted program, a state mandated program which serves students at the highest levels of achievement, is not representative of the diversity in the state's current student enrollment. McBee (2006) cited the following statistics about this growing majority of diverse or minority students in Georgia and the ability of the system to effectively meet their academic needs. McBee found that Caucasian students outnumbered students from diverse backgrounds four to one in the gifted program with 73% Caucasian students to 18% Minority students represented in the gifted program. This fact highlights the significant concern related to the underrepresentation of these diverse students in the gifted program from a state perspective.

This concern is also evident in Suburban County School District (pseudonym), a small suburban school district in Georgia (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007), that offers a snapshot of a school district that is large enough to offer gifted services in 8 out of 10 elementary schools and also offer a varied schools with representative populations of students – majority- minority students and majority- Caucasian students. Even though a nearly equal representation of Caucasian students to students from diverse backgrounds is found in the elementary school enrollment, there is an underrepresentation of diverse students in the gifted program (Suburban County School District, 2007). In Suburban County Schools, 80% of students in the gifted program are Caucasian. This disproportionate figure would appear to call the following into question:

Georgia educators are committed to the belief that education is a means by which each individual has the opportunity to reach his or her fullest

potential... and in accordance with this philosophy, Georgia schools will provide education programs that recognize and make provisions for the special needs of gifted and talented learners (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

### Background of the Study

In 1988, the U. S. Congress passed legislation known as the *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program Act* (U. S. Department of Education, 2007) to serve students traditionally underrepresented in gifted and talented programs – economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient, and disabled students – and to help reduce the gap in achievement among certain groups of students at the highest levels of achievement. In October 1993, the *National Excellence* report (U. S. Department of Education, 1993) on gifted and talented students also recognized the underrepresentation economically disadvantaged students and minority students in the gifted and talented programs. According to the report:

America must increase opportunities for economically disadvantaged and minority children with exceptional talent and reflect a new way of thinking about children with outstanding talent or giftedness. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor (U. S. Department of Education, 1993).

President George W. Bush addressed the same concerns for improving the academic achievement of all students within the preamble to the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. “Taken together, these reforms express my deep belief in our public schools

and their mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America” (U. S. Department of Education, 2002, p.2). This Act made it a requirement for all American public schools to recognize students from diverse backgrounds and provided a solution to address their academic needs. Despite these national initiatives, the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program remains an important concern (Baldwin, 2002; Bernal, 2002; Callahan, 2005; de Wet, 2006; Ford & Harmon, 2001; Lohman, 2005; Miller, 2005; Milner, 2005; Sarouphim, 2004; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007; VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, & Avery, 2002; Winebrenner, 2001), and the gifted programs are less racially and culturally diverse than other U. S. public education program (Ford & Grantham, 1996).

In October 2005, Georgia conducted an annual student enrollment count that indicated the state has become a majority-minority public school system (Johnson, 2006). These changing enrollment demographics have brought increased attention to the diversity of the student populations and brought increased attention to the student academic achievement gap and rates of academic improvement among minority students (Johnson, 2006).

Outstanding talents have been noted in children and youth from all cultural groups and from all areas of diversity (Callahan, 2004; Winebrenner, 2001), but enrollment figures for Georgia, a state recently noted as being a majority-minority public school system, indicate that underrepresentation of minority students continues to exist in the gifted program. McBee (2006), in his study on gifted referrals in the state of Georgia, obtained dataset records via special request from the Georgia Department of Education. At the state level, McBee’s (2006) figures show Georgia’s 2004 public school student



enrollment included 275,821 or 39% African-American students, 59,398 or 8% Hispanic students, and 333,569 or 47% Caucasian students. Conversely, McBee's records show the 2004 Georgia elementary student enrollment in the gifted program totaled 55,856 overall gifted students, with 8,695 or 15.56% African-American gifted students, 1,389 or 2.48% Hispanic gifted students, and 41,005 or 73.41% Caucasian gifted students.

At the school district level, underrepresentation of minority students also exists in the gifted program (Morris, 2002; Suburban County Schools, 2007). For example, in the 2000-2001 school year, a large metropolitan school district in Georgia had a total enrollment of 58,572 students, 54% or 31,889 Caucasian students and 45% or 26,683 African-American students (Morris, 2002, p.60). Despite what seems to be a racial balanced student enrollment, Morris (2002) found that 89% or 4,862 Caucasian students as compared to 11% or 630 African-American students are enrolled in the district's gifted program. Similar figures were obtained for the 2006-2007 school year in a mid-sized school district in Georgia. The total enrollment included 2,229 or 36.5% African-American students, 488 or 8% Hispanic students, 3,289 or 53.8% Caucasian students, and 103 or 1.7% of students representing other ethnicities; while the total enrollment in the district's gifted program included 71 or 13.4% African American students, 10 or 1.9% Hispanic students, 435 or 81.9% Caucasian students, and 15 or 2.8% of students representing other ethnicities (Suburban County Schools, 2007). The above figures from the state and from the two local school districts demonstrate the continued existence of underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs.

There are several reasons for underrepresentation of diverse groups of students in the gifted program. One frequently cited reason for underrepresentation is the method of

identifying gifted students (Bernel, 2002; Borg, 2003; Baldwin, 2002; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Lohman, 2005; Maker, 1996; Naglieri, 2001; Naglieri & Ford, 2003; Sarouphim, 2004; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007; Winebrenner, 2001). Naglieri (2001), author of the *Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test*, a nonverbal standardized ability test, notes that by continuing to define intelligence by such traditional tests as the *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale* and the *Wechsler Intelligence Scales* for children and adults, schools give voice to the problems inherent to accurate identification of gifted and creative children. According to Sarouphim (2004), this thinking creates the assumption that students from diverse backgrounds are cognitively inferior due to scoring low on these standardized tests. In an effort to solve the resulting underrepresentation of children from diverse backgrounds, various studies by Bouchard (2004), Borg (2003), Lohman (2005), Naglieri (2001), Maker (1996), Van Tassel-Baska et al (2007); Swanson (2006); and Winebrenner (2001) have investigated alternate means of assessment, offering broad and unique views of identifying and defining gifted students. Winebrenner (2001, p.6) suggests using nonverbal standardized tests such as the *Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test* or *Raven's Progressive Matrix*. Naglieri (2001) details the use of a Cognitive Assessment System (CAS) based on the PASS Theory which assesses Planning, Attention, Simultaneous, and Successive cognitive processes to measure human ability. Maker (1996) refers to DISCOVER – Discovering Intellectual Strengths and Capabilities through Observation while allowing for Varied Ethnic Responses — as a performance-based identification process for giftedness in minority students (Sarouphim, 2004). VanTassel-Baska et al (2007) encourage the use of multiple authentic assessments

including a variety of measures such as interview, portfolios, and grades to determine gifted identification.

Using multiple criteria and information sources to identify gifted students is often seen as another type of alternate or nontraditional assessment (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). Part of this process, as seen by VanTassel-Baska et al (2007), includes the combined use of such instruments as portfolios, interviews, performance tasks, nontraditional standardized measures, inventories, and checklists. In the state of Georgia, identification process has expanded over the past decade beyond using ability and achievement testing as the sole determiner for giftedness. Krisel and Cowan (1997) describe 1991 as a beginning of the state's journey toward a more inclusive identification of giftedness. After a lengthy and controversial process, the Georgia State Board of Education adopted a highly innovative and expanded model for identifying gifted students using the multiple-criteria rule for eligibility in the gifted program (Krisel & Cowan, 1997).

According to the Georgia State Board of Education (2008), the definition of students who are eligible for gifted education services in Georgia states:

A gifted student is a student who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability(ies), exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her abilities (SBOE Rule 160-4-2-.38, p. 1).

The eligibility criteria for gifted program placement in Georgia is provided in SBOE Rule 160-4-2-.38 (Georgia Department of Education, 2008) The multiple criteria for student eligibility to be placed in the gifted program is determined by four categories for assessment and the performance standards that must be achieved in each category as defined in Table 1.

In screening for intellectual giftedness the use of a single criterion has been shown to identify fewer than half of the gifted children in a given population (Ryan, 1983). Georgia is recognized by the Davidson Institute (Davidson Institute, 2006) as one of only four states implementing a multiple-criteria approach to gifted identification. Many researchers within the state and internationally are continuing to investigate and study alternate methods in hopes of identifying more underrepresented populations of gifted students.

A second contributing reason for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a missing parental partnership and advocacy between the school and home as well as student and family choice (Craig, Connor & Washington, 2003; Ford & Harmon, 2001; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Nelson, 2001; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006; Taylor, 2003; Thompson, 2003; Washington, 2001). Several studies on parental partnership with schools, including Thompson (2003) and Rubie-Davies et al. (2006), found that educators are not always the most reliable or accurate judges of parent partnership with schools. Rubie-Davies et al. (2006) cited cases where teachers, as a means of exonerating themselves from student failure, often view poor academic achievement as the result of home influences.

Table 1

*Eligibility Criteria for Gifted Placement as Stipulated by Georgia State Regulations*

Categories	Grade	Score
Psychometric Approach – Meet Criteria for Both Mental Ability and Achievement		
	Assessment	
Mental Ability Assessment	K-2	Composite at the 99 <sup>th</sup> percentile
	3-12	Composite at the 96 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Achievement Assessment	K-12	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile – Total Reading
		or
	K-12	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile – Total Math
		or
	K-12	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile – Total Battery
	or	
	K-12	Superior Product/Performance Assessment
Multiple-Criteria Approach – Meet Criteria in any Three of the Four Data Categories, Mental Abilities, Achievement Assessment, Creativity, and Motivation		
Mental Ability Assessment	K-2	Composite at the 99 <sup>th</sup> percentile
	3-12	Composite at the 96 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Achievement Assessment	K-12	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile – Total Reading
		or

*Eligibility Criteria for Gifted Placement as Stipulated by Georgia State Regulations*

(continued)

Categories	Grade	Score
Creativity	K-12	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile – Total Math
	or	
	K-12	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile – Total Battery
	or	
	K-12	Superior Product/Performance Assessment
	K-12	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile on Total Battery Standardized Test of Creative Thinking
	or	
		90 <sup>th</sup> percentile on a standardized creativity characteristics rating scale
	or	
		Score 90 from 3 or more qualified evaluators on a structured observation or evaluation tool

*Eligibility Criteria for Gifted Placement as Stipulated by Georgia State Regulations*

(continued)

Categories	Grade	Score
Motivation	K-12	90 <sup>th</sup> percentile on a standardized motivational characteristics rating scale
	or	Score 90 from 3 or more qualified evaluators on a structured observation or evaluation tool
	or	Grade Point Average (GPA) of at least 3.5 on 4.0 scale (4.0 = A and 3.0 = B) over previous 2 school year

Few schools consistently and aggressively build partnerships with diverse families concerning gifted programs. Actions such as holding meetings to educate diverse parents on the purpose of gifted programs or teaching parents how to advocate for their child's placement in gifted programs are seldom practiced by schools (Ford & Harmon, 2001). Baldwin (2002) found that parents play an important part in the identification,

program development, and evaluation of programs designed for gifted students from diverse backgrounds. In her reference to Karnes' 1984 study of Head Start students, Baldwin (2002, p. 146) noted that when parents from culturally diverse backgrounds were trained in using activities to develop areas defined as indicators of giftedness in their young children and were also taught to recognize this potential in their children, that many of these children were among those later nominated for gifted programs.

A third reason for underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs are teacher beliefs. In her recent national study, de Wet (2006) surveyed teachers from eight states to determine their beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. In the study, de Wet found that teachers have a significant influence on the success or failure of their students. Through their lived experiences, teachers form beliefs, attitudes, and actions that influence the instructional practices and goals in their classrooms (de Wet, 2006, p. 9). Teacher beliefs are shaped from their biases, their thinking, and their expectations of students (Baker, 1999; Bell, 2002; de Wet, 2006; Gay, 2002; Payne, 1998; Siegle, 2001; & Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997). Researchers, Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman (2002) explain that the underrepresentation of certain groups in gifted programs indicates a deficit perspective or what Grantham and Ford (2003) call deficit thinking by teachers. Educators that exhibit a deficit orientation in thinking fail to see a student's true academic ability (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). This leaves teachers relying on preconceived stereotypes resulting in inherent biases (Siegle, 2001). When teachers are asked to consider a student's demonstration of giftedness, this inherent bias leads to a focus only on skill achievement and cognition (Endepohls-Ulpe & Ruf, 2005), rather than creativity, leadership, and motor skills



(Siegle, 2001). Teachers are seldom provided with skills to discern alternate manifestations of giftedness or skills to detect verbal talents in students lacking fluency and verbal expressiveness (Callahan, 2005). Students from different cultures exhibit gifts and talents differently, but perceived cultural and linguistic weaknesses may limit these students' opportunities for consideration in the gifted program (Siegle, 2001).

A primary limiting factor in underrepresentation of students from diverse backgrounds in the gifted program is the inherent beliefs of teachers (Baker, 1999; Bell, 2002; Callahan, 2005; de Wet, 2006; Gay, 2002; Payne, 1998; Siegle, 2001; & Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997). Callahan (2005) states that one reason behind diminished beliefs in the potential of ethnic minority and low-income students lie in a strong acceptance by educators of a very narrow conception of intelligence and giftedness. Callahan further states that teachers are seldom provided skills in discerning alternate ways in which students may be gifted. Author and lecturer, Payne (1998), noted that a lack of teacher understanding of students living in poverty contribute to their poor academic achievement. Few teacher education programs provide coursework on understanding cultural and economic diversity; therefore, teachers enter the profession unprepared to recognize those distinctive characteristics (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). Gay (2002) asserts that due to their lack of understanding of students, their culture, and the behavioral structures of their lives, teachers fail to practice culturally responsive teaching. This lack of understanding has an affect on students from diverse backgrounds, leading to poor academic achievement.

According to de Wet (2006) and Rist (1970), teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and actions influence instructional practices, goals, or in other words, their expectations.

Teacher expectations, when influenced by deficit thinking and biases, can negatively influence student achievement and performance (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). These are often based on student characteristics such as ethnicity or gender, and these expectations may be categorized as self-fulfilling prophecy effects. When beliefs, thinking, and biases are manifested in low expectations, then the teaching practices impede student achievement (Rubie-Davies et al, 2006). Rist (1970), in his qualitative study of teacher expectations, found that teachers' expectations of a pupil's academic performance may have a strong influence on the actual performance of the student. Students who were seen as successful were those who closely fit teachers' criteria for the ideal type of successful child. Certain attributes such as physical appearance, dress, mannerisms, and language that the individual teacher associated with success were based on the teacher's perceptions of the larger society (Rist, 1970). Moore et al.(2005) contend that this deficit thinking of cultural diversity may prevent educators from recognizing giftedness in diverse groups of students.

Previous research done on the subject of teachers' beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in gifted programs (de Wet, 2006) was conducted as a quantitative study. Although previous studies determine that teachers' beliefs influence actions that influence their instructional practices and goals, this researcher used a qualitative design to understand how teachers' beliefs influence the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

#### Statement of the Problem

The underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a concern voiced in numerous research studies. In the process of determining the reasons for

underrepresentation of these diverse students, research cites several reasons. Standardized testing and traditional assessments for determining giftedness have been named as reasons for underrepresentation of minority students. Researchers also refer to the breakdown of parental partnership and the home and school connection as reasons for poor student achievement, leading the average person to realize this breakdown may influence the underrepresentation of diverse learners in gifted programs. Research also supports teacher bias, deficit thinking, and low expectations concerning diverse learners as a reason for underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, but there is limited research that further explores what teachers actually believe about the underrepresentation of minority and low socio-economic status students. Data analysis conducted on Georgia's statewide student enrollment as well as the analysis of student enrollment in Suburban County School District, a mid-sized suburban school district in Georgia, show the presence of cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity among these student populations. The specific data on the enrollment in the gifted program at the state and district level also indicate a similar underrepresentation of minority and low socio-economic status students.

A recent national study (de Wet, 2006) was conducted on teacher beliefs about the culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in the gifted program. This quantitative study, serving as a baseline study of teacher beliefs concerning diverse learners (de Wet, 2006), noted that little research has been done to determine teacher beliefs concerning culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in the gifted program and their underrepresentation in the program. This quantitative study was conducted on a large, national sampling of teachers' beliefs and less than an 8% return on

the survey was achieved by this study (de Wet, 2006). Although previous studies determine that teachers' beliefs influence actions that influence their instructional practices and goals, this researcher used a qualitative design to understand how teachers' beliefs influence the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. This study provided this researcher with an avenue to understand this underrepresentation of minority students from teachers' perspectives by giving teachers a "voice from the trenches" and offering a different point of view in this continuing dialogue over the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to explore teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program in a mid-sized suburban school district in Georgia.

#### Research Questions

The overarching question of this qualitative study is this: What are teachers' fundamental beliefs about the representation of minority students in the gifted program in a small suburban school district in Georgia? The following sub-questions will guide the research.

1. What do teachers believe are the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program?
2. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their ethnicities?
3. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their experiences?

4. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students shaped by their gifted training?

#### Significance of the Study

The changing demographics of America's educational system at the federal, state and local levels have brought increased attention to meeting the educational needs of the diverse student populations in the public schools. The state of Georgia has made efforts over the past decade to address this underrepresentation of students from diverse backgrounds at the highest level of achievement, the state's gifted program (Krisel & Cowan, 1997). In spite of these statewide efforts, the underrepresentation of these students from diverse backgrounds still persists (McBee, 2006). Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway (2005, p.25) point out that less than 2% of more than 4,000 articles written about gifted and talented students since 1924 were about students from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. By exploring underrepresentation from a lesser known area of study, the personal beliefs of teachers, this researcher will provide insight into the personal beliefs of teachers, offering an up-close view on this continuing issue.

Noted researchers have contributed much to the ongoing issue of underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program (Bernal, 2002; Bouchard, 2004; Borg, 2003; Callahan, 2005; de Wet, 2006; Ford & Harmon, 2001; Grantham & Ford, 2003; McBee, 2006; Naglieri, 2001; Maker, 1996; Morris, 2002; Sarouphim, 2004; Winebrenner, 2001). A national study (deWet, 2006) has offered survey data on teachers' beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students, but no small-scaled study, such as a study in a single school district, has been conducted to capture the

personal beliefs of teachers about the underrepresentation of students from diverse backgrounds in the gifted program. Through this researcher's one-on-one, probing study of teachers' beliefs, a means will be offered for understanding this nationally surveyed data at the district level in hopes of providing information from a new perspective on the lingering concern of underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

This researcher has had personal experience as an administrator where underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a continuing concern. This researcher sees the underrepresentation as a problem with no readily apparent root cause. The research study will provide this researcher with an avenue to understand this underrepresentation of minority students from teachers' perspectives. Through their lived experiences, teachers form beliefs, attitudes, actions, and certainly perspectives that influence the instructional practices and goals in their classrooms (deWet, 2006). Giving teachers a "voice from the trenches" offers another point of view in this continuing dialogue over the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Through this open discourse, an increased awareness of the continuing underrepresentation may offer an avenue for increasing the representation of minority students in the gifted programs.

#### Research Procedures

This study uses a qualitative method design. Extensive research has been conducted on the underrepresentation of students in the gifted program, but little is known regarding teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of diverse students. Qualitative research provides a means to explore and offer insight into this lesser known area. Designing a qualitative approach allows this researcher to seek and discover

participants' perspectives on their world. Additionally, it offers an interactive process between this researcher and the participants all the while gaining their in-depth thoughts and observable behaviors (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

A purposive sampling procedure (Gay & Airasian, 2000) was used to select four schools from Suburban County School District. The sampling provided this researcher with 8 classroom teachers from the school district who can provide pertinent information about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program while ensuring the representation of ethnicities and teachers with a varied training in gifted education (Gay & Airasian, 2000).

Through the use of a qualitative method design, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (Gay & Airasian, 2000) with 8 classroom teachers. Interviews offered this researcher a way to explore teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies whose subtle meanings could not be captured or developed in questionnaires or surveys (Meloy, 2002). Prior to the interviews, this researcher followed Marshall and Rossman's (1999) recommended phenomenological research procedure of writing a full description of her own experience with the phenomenon of underrepresentation of diverse students as a way of gaining clarity from her own preconceptions and biases, then separating her experiences from those of the interviewees.

Comprehensive interview questions will be formulated by the researcher and are based on the overarching question as well as the three sub-questions. The researcher will allow new questions to form and expand the inquiry to that of an open interview. Interviews will be conducted in a comfortable and non-threatening location convenient for each participant. Interviews are planned for 45-60 minutes and each session will be

tape recorded. This will allow the researcher to capture the interview precisely and thoroughly. The final draft of the interview questions is found in Appendix B.

The process of data analysis organized what this researcher has seen, heard, and read so that sense can be made of what has been learned (Glesne, 2006). Throughout the research study, this researcher utilized the purpose statement and overarching questions as a guide during data collection and data analysis. In consideration of this research study's purpose and overarching question – to explore teachers' beliefs, about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program – tape-recorded interviews were this researcher's method of probing into the personal beliefs of teachers. As part of the continuing data analysis, the tape-recorded interviews were professionally transcribed. All meaningful data, including the researcher's journal and interview transcripts were analyzed and coded to determine emerging thematic ideas and patterns that address the study's purpose. The gathered data materials were organized under categories of similar themes or ideas. The coding process included matching short phrases or an abbreviation of major code and sub-codes with each line or group of lines in the transcribed text.

#### Limitations

1. Being an administrator and being considered an “outsider” by some teachers made data collecting more difficult for this researcher.

#### Delimitations

1. Eight teachers from four schools were purposively selected for this research study representing well over several thousand educators from this mid-sized suburban school district



## Definition of Terms

*Affirmative Development of Academic Ability.* The deliberate effort to equip students with strategies that build knowledge and develop techniques to solve both common and novel problems in pursuit of high academic achievement

*Alternate Assessment or Nontraditional Assessment.* Alternate assessment and nontraditional assessment are often used interchangeably. This type of assessment is often suggested as a means of identifying underrepresented populations of students for the gifted program. VanTassel-Baska, Feng, and Evans (2007) refer to the use of this assessment instead of relying on intelligence and achievement test scores for the sole identification of giftedness in students. The researchers suggest examples of alternate assessment may include observations in learning opportunities, performance-based assessment, portfolios, grades, inventories, nominations, and interviews

*Automatic Referrals.* Automatic referrals are referrals of students into the gifted program that occur automatically when a student scores in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher on a standardized test, (McBee, 2006).

*Crystallized Intelligence.* Crystallized intelligence is dependent upon the influences unique to a particular society and is represented by performance on vocabulary and general information tests (Rubin, Brown, & Priddle, 1978). This type of intelligence stems from accumulated knowledge and experience (Kliegel & Altgassen, 2006).

*Culturally Connected Caring.* “Culturally connected caring” (Howard, 2002, p.434) refers to a display of caring that occurs within a cultural context with which students are familiar and in a manner that does not require students to abandon their cultural integrity.

*Culturally, Linguistically, and Economically Diverse Students.* Students from diverse backgrounds and culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students are described in different ways in the professional literature. Baldwin (2002) discusses gifted students who are “culturally diverse,” while Bernal (2002) refers to the importance of representation of “culturally and linguistically different students” in our gifted and talented programs. Callahan (2005) describes students from “underrepresented populations” in her research, and de Wet (2006) surveyed teachers concerning their beliefs about “culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students.” Additionally, VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, and Avery (2002) refer to the identification of “economically disadvantaged and minority gifted learners” in our gifted and talented programs. The two designations of minority students or students from diverse backgrounds are used interchangeably and are identifications I have chosen to use in my study.

*Deficit Thinking or Deficit Perspective.* Deficit thinking or a deficit orientation when held by educators hinders access to gifted programs for diverse students. This thinking hinders the ability and willingness of educators to recognize the strengths of African American students (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002)

*Fluid Intelligence.* Fluid intelligence is defined as our "on-the-spot reasoning ability." Fluid intelligence is free from factors of education and experience (Rubin, Brown, & Priddle, 1978). This intelligence, biological in nature, enables us to solve cognitive problems without the help of earlier learning experiences (Kliegel & Altgassen, 2006).

*Gatekeepers.* A term used by researchers (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Swanson, 2006) in reference to classroom teachers primarily in school districts that base gifted

placement primarily on teacher referrals. Teachers are called the gatekeepers or decision-makers when deciding whether a student is either placed in the gifted program or proceeds toward further testing in qualifying for placement in gifted programs.

*Minority Students and the Disadvantaged.* Minority students, diverse students and students of color are used interchangeably in the literature reviewed by this researcher. Minority is defined as a group of people, within a society, whose members have different ethnic, racial, national, linguistic, or other characteristics from the rest of society. The term minority and disadvantaged are not synonymous even though they are frequently interchanged in literature (Passow & Frasier, 1996). According to Passow and Frasier (1996) students who are members of racial and ethnic minority cultures are neither economically nor educationally disadvantaged, but because of their racial and cultural backgrounds, they often encounter biases similar to the disadvantaged member of their group.

*Parental Partnerships.* Parental partnership refers to a relationship between the school and parents of students built primarily on communication and information-sharing.

*Phenomenological Research.* Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a world view. It rests on the assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 112).

*Qualitative Research.* A qualitative study is used to understand some social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved by understanding and interpreting the phenomena from the participants' point of view (Glesne, 2006, p.4).

*Racial Identity.* Racial identity refers to the extent to which people of color are aware of, understand, and value their racial background, appearance, and heritage (Grantham & Ford, 2003).

*Referral.* The term referral or nomination is used interchangeably in many studies. Both describe the process of designating a student as potentially gifted. Once the student has received a referral, he or she is legally required to undergo official testing for gifted program placement, assuming the student's parent consent is obtained for further testing (McBee, 2006, p. 103).

*Self-fulfilling Prophecy.* A term coined by Robert Merton in 1948 to describe how erroneous beliefs about people and situations sometimes create their own fulfillment (Kilb & Jussim, 1994).

*Semi-structured Interview.* This is a type of interview where questions and order of presentation are determined. Questions have open ends and probing of participant's responses is permitted, giving the researcher flexibility to gather information (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 221).

### Summary

Over the past 30 years the numbers of students from diverse backgrounds has nearly doubled, bringing significant change to the American educational system. During the same time, the state of Georgia had its first student count in which the state became a majority-minority public school system (Johnson, 2006). These national and state statistics have served to draw increased attention to the academic achievement of minority students.

McBee (2006) cited data demonstrating a concern over Georgia's efforts to meet the needs of this growing majority of diverse students. He found that twice as many of the students in the state's gifted program – a program created to address needs of students at the highest levels of achievement – are Caucasian when compared to the numbers of majority students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. In Suburban County School District, there is a similar underrepresentation of minority students in its gifted program

Despite many well-known national initiatives, the underrepresentation of students from diverse backgrounds in our gifted programs remains a concern (Bernal, 2002; Callahan, 2005; Ford & Harmon, 2001; Granatham & Ford, 2003; Morris, 2002; Sarouphim, 2004; Winebrenner, 2001). Research studies cite numerous reasons for the phenomenon of underrepresentation in gifted programs, but to date, there is little research available that explores what teachers, especially at the local levels in education, believe about this underrepresentation of minority students. So the purpose of this research study is to explore teachers' beliefs about this underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program in a mid-sized suburban school district in Georgia.

Using a qualitative research design, this researcher interviewed 8 classroom teachers from a purposive sampling of 4 schools from a mid-sized suburban school district in Georgia. These in-depth interviews will describe the shared meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) of the concept of underrepresentation of diverse students from the voices of different teachers.

Outstanding talents are present in children from all cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic groups (Callahan, 2004; Winebrenner, 2001), but gifted enrollment figures for

the state of Georgia and enrollment figures on a school district level indicate that underrepresentation of these diverse students in the gifted program continues to exist. Through this researcher's personal, in-depth study of teachers' beliefs, an additional perspective on the issue of this underrepresentation will emerge to enhance current research and to give teachers a voice in the ongoing discourse.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“The world we have created is a product of our thinking.

We can not change things until we change our thinking”

(Albert Einstein, 1879/1955)

#### Introduction

A review of state and federal legislation, including the 1988 *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program Act* (U. S. Department of Education, 2007) enacted to serve underrepresented gifted students, the 1993 *National Excellence* report (U. S. Department of Education, 1993) on gifted and talented students, and the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 that legislates the recognition of academic needs of all students at state and federal levels, indicate the presence of initiatives designed to address the representation of minority students in the gifted program. Despite these plans of action, the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program remains (Baldwin, 2002; Bernal, 2002; Callahan, 2005; de Wet, 2006; Ford & Harmon, 2001; Lohman, 2005; Miller, 2005; Milner, 2005; Sarouphim, 2004; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007; VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, & Avery, 2002; Winebrenner, 2001).

#### Definition of Giftedness

Numerous conceptions and definitions of gifted students abound in the research and literature surrounding the topic of giftedness (Borland, 1997; Crammond, 2004; Coleman, 2004; Gagne', 2004; Renzulli, 2002; Sternberg, 2007). The most frequently quoted definition comes from Commissioner of Education Sidney P. Marland in his 1972 Marland Report to Congress (National Association for Gifted Children, 2007). This

report, detailing children's talents and abilities, has become the origin for the current federal definition of gifted students. Now, the most current revision, located in the No Child Left Behind Act (Title IX, Part A, Sec. 9101. Definitions (22)), states:

“Gifted and talented, when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities” (U. S. Department of Education, 2004).

The passage of the 1988 *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program Act* (U. S. Department of Education, 2007) and re-authorization of the act in 1994 reaffirmed Marland's report to Congress. The Javits Bill states that “outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor” (U. S. Department of Education, 2007).

While federal legislation offers a concise definition and expectations for gifted and talented students, it does not preclude the discussion over a definitive concept of giftedness. As an example, Borland (1997) states that the term gifted is something we have constructed or invented in our writing and talking. Gagne' (2004) also describes the myriad of definitions as the “fascinating creativity of scholars in their attempt to circumscribe the nature of giftedness and talent.” As a means of organizing the inexhaustible supply of definitions, Renzulli (2002) suggests that definitions for giftedness fall on a continuum from conservative to liberal. Conservative definitions,



Renzulli explains, are restrictive and tidy, whereas liberal definitions expand the conception of giftedness and offer multi-faceted approaches to giftedness. Renzulli's three-ring definition of gifted behaviors – ability, commitment, and creativity (Renzulli, 1978; Reis, 2004) supports a dynamic nature to defining giftedness (Coleman, 2004) and represents what Borland (1997) describes as the most influential definition of this generation. Gardner (1983) proposed a domain approach to giftedness in his theory of multiple intelligences --- linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Steinberg (1985) developed his triarchic theory of intelligence that looked at analytical, synthetic/creative, and practical intelligences as singular and multiple forms of abilities.

Meanwhile, Gagne' (2004) argues that a formal distinction should be made between such concepts as potential versus achievement and aptitude versus realization in discussion of giftedness in the field of gifted and talented. As part of the continuing debate, Coleman (2004) reached the conclusion that giftedness may never have a proper definition, but instead be described in a new consensus definition. In an essay that responds to the many opinions on giftedness, Cramond (2004, p.15) explains, “How can we expect to solve [a problem], when the field can't even agree on a definition of giftedness!”

According to Sternberg (2007), whether a person is judged gifted should not depend on a definition but on the values of culture. In assessing giftedness, Sternberg states, we must take cultural origins and contexts into account. As educators, our concept of giftedness is the basis of all assessment, curricular, and administrative decisions we make about gifted individuals (Cramond, 2004, p.16). According to Cramond (2004), to

provide a single definition of giftedness may signal the end of the search for truth, and in our culturally diverse country, the current proliferation of definitions for giftedness allows for representation of various viewpoints, consideration of diverse abilities, and the expansion of the field.

While much discussion continues on defining giftedness at the national and international level, it is worthwhile to note that federal legislations do not mandate states to provide special services to their gifted and talented students (Education Commission of the States, 2004). The state of Georgia, however, does mandate gifted education in schools and mandates that gifted students be served. Georgia defines a gifted student as:

“a student who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability(ies), exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her abilities” (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

#### Identification Process for Gifted Programs

The idea of intelligence and giftedness can be traced to a specific time and intellectual environment (Borland, 1997). In 1869, Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, presented his studies of intellectual capacities and achievements in his seminal work, *Hereditary Genius*, placing in formal terms the idea that people vary in their intellectual abilities and talents with an emphasis on the high heritability factor (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Stanley, 1976). Galton’s most influential and immediate successor, Alfred Binet, with help from Theodore’ Simon, was successful in developing questions that served as a rudimentary test for measuring intelligence

(Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Stanley, 1976). In the early decades of the twentieth century, Stanford psychologist, Lewis Madison Terman, produced what eventually became the *Stanford-Binet Intellectual Scale* (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

Intelligence may be described as a scientific construct (Borland, 1997), and an abstract concept (Lyman, 1998) which some see an example of outdated technology (Naglieri, 2001). Historically, the identification of gifted and talented students has been inextricably linked to intelligence tests (Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins, Seigel, Zhang, & Chen, 2005). Tests such as the *Stanford-Binet Intellectual Scale* and the *Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale*, used as measures of intelligence and placement in gifted programs, reflect a cultural conception of competence designed to predict school performance and aptitude and are dependent on a student's current level of intellectual capacity for achievement in reading, language, and math (Lyman, 1998; Sternberg, 2007). Being gifted and talented equaled an intelligence score of at least 135 and all others were viewed as not gifted (Brown et al, 2005).

Lohman (2006), co-author of the Cognitive Abilities Test, concedes that some current researchers believe it is possible to administer a good ability test with equal fairness to all individuals regardless of their access to language or the background of the dominant culture, but he likens this thinking to folklore versus scientific theory. According to Lohman (2006, p.39) the controversy surrounding language in testing has appeared because of the linguistic diversity of children in the U.S., but to expel language from tests of ability also expels an enormous amount of cognition. Words, he states, not only express thought but provide new ways of thinking. Although Lohman (2005) does state that nonverbal, figural tests do have a role to play in the identification process, it

should always be used as an ancillary measure and not the primary means of identification.

Recent research conducted on the construct of intelligence has brought about a cognitive revolution ( Naglieri, 2001), and with continuing research, a climate for redefining intelligence with alternatives to traditional IQ tests is occurring (Baldwin, 2002; Bouchard, 2004; Maker, 1996; Naglieri, 2001; Naglieri & Ford, 2003; Pierce, Adams, Spears Neumeister, Cassady, Dixon, & Cross, 2007; Sarouphim, 2004; Sternberg, 2007; VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, & Avery, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007).

Even with new theories of intelligence and concepts of giftedness, cognitive ability test scores dominated the identification process for most of the past century. According to Naglieri (2001), author of a nonverbal standardized ability test, *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale* and the *Wechsler Intelligence Scales* are the tools mainly used to define intelligence and identification of giftedness. Over the past century, little change has occurred in these intelligence tests, and this lack of change or stagnation may explain many of the problems inherent to accurate identification of gifted children (Naglieri, 2001).

Concern and even hostility over intelligence tests and the resulting ineffective placement of minority students in educational programs abounds (Lopez, 1997). Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman (2002) are researchers who voice their concerns over underrepresentation of minority students in advanced educational programs such as gifted program. They see this as a “deficit perspective” which may create the assumption that students from diverse backgrounds are cognitively inferior due to their lower scores on

these standardized tests (Ford et al, 2002; Sarouphim, 2004). Ford and Grantham (1996) contend that educators must understand that not all students are accustomed to being assessed, especially on an individual basis. According to Ford and Grantham (1996), some countries with Hispanic populations seldom assess students individually, and this unfamiliarity may make Hispanic students anxious to the point of inability to accurately demonstrate their achievement and potential.

Studies are currently underway to investigate alternate means of assessment as a means of answering the concerns over problematic gifted identification processes. Winebrenner (2001) suggests the use of nonverbal standardized tests including *Ravens Progressive Matrices* and *Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Tests*. These tests combined with teacher observation, task analysis, or even offering non-mainstream children practice items and activities prior to testing may address the educational ignoring of ethnically and culturally diverse children in our gifted programs (Winebrenner, 2001, p.6).

There is no consensus in the field about how abilities should be measured (Naglieri & Ford, 2005). If gifted is defined as those with high achievement and have the ability to master academic subjects (Bouchard, 2004, p. 48; Nalieri & Ford, 2005, p. 30) then it is reasonable that a test of achievement would be sufficient to identify those students; however, if we define gifted ness ina broader way that looks on potential achievement in terms of academic aptitude, insight and innovation, creativity, leadership, personal and interpersonal skill, or visual and performing arts (Bouchard, 2004) then there is support for the U. S. Department of Education (1993) notion of identifying students that are demonstrating high achievement and those who are deemed “potentially

gifted” (Naglieri & Ford, 2005) with potential of responding positively to gifted education.

Several alternate methods of identification are part of current research in the gifted identification process. In his article on assessments that challenge the status-quo of IQ tests, Naglieri (2001) details the use of a Cognitive Assessment System (CAS) based on the PASS Theory to identify gifted students. The PASS Theory, explains Naglieri (2001), assesses Planning, Attention, Simultaneous, and Successive cognitive processes and is based on the neuropsychological, information processing and cognitive psychological research of A.R. Luria. The PASS Theory provides a differing view of past human ability measures. This measure of human cognitive functioning assesses four components – Planning, Attention, Simultaneous, and Successive. According to the author, results of the study (Naglieri, 2001) show the PASS Theory to have utility as a predictor of achievement, to account for more variance in achievement for a variety of children, and to not contain items that are highly reliant on acquired knowledge.

*Raven’s Progressive Matrices* test (RPM) and the *Naglieri Non-Verbal Ability Tests* are two examples of alternative, nonverbal assessment of reasoning and problem solving independent of educational criteria (Pierce, Adams, Speirs Neumeister, Cassidy, Dixon, & Cross, 2007). Both are often mentioned as measures of fluid intelligence rather than crystallized intelligence. Considered language-free and culturally fair, these instruments are seen as measures that may be used to identify students from diverse populations (Pierce et al, 2007; VanTassel-Baska et al, 2007). In an early study (Rubin, Brown, & Priddle, 1978) conducted on intelligence in elementary-aged children, the researchers concluded that school administrators should be aware that standard measures

of crystallized intelligence assesses only one form of ability. These tests neglect operational and logical skills free of environmental impact, and caution should be taken when using such tests to label children's intelligence (1978, p. 35).

VanTassel-Baska et al. (2007) and Mills and Ablard (1993) advise the use of more instruments a nonverbal assessment when identifying gifted placement. In one study using nonverbal ability assessments, teachers and gifted coordinators expressed concerns over some of the students identified as gifted such as retained students, students lacking motivation, or students whose classroom performance did not match expectations for giftedness. As a result, a need for altering the identification process was determined, and the researchers suggested that gifted programming for these students may require careful planning (Mills & Ablard, 1993).

Another assessment tool, Discovering Intellectual Strengths and Capabilities through Observation while allowing for Varied Ethnic Responses or DISCOVER, is being studied to determine if this performance-based assessment can be used effectively in identifying gifted minority students (Sarouphim, 2004). Sarouphim's study followed previous research revealing that minorities fare better on alternate assessments similar to DISCOVER than traditional methods. As an assessment, DISCOVER is grounded in Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory and Maker's definition of giftedness. It was primarily developed to identify gifted children from culturally diverse populations (Sarouphim, 2004). Through her research, Sarouphim found that by using DISCOVER to identify gifted students, the percentage of all students identified as gifted, especially minority students, was higher than the percentage of students identified using traditional standardized tests.

Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration is another alternate assessment that promises to offer a framework for examining the components and developmental dynamics of giftedness (Bouchard, 2004). ElemenOE is a Likert-scaled observation checklist that measures the personality characteristics in elementary aged children (Bouchard, 2004, p. 48). Bouchard explains that the characteristics observed are called overexcitabilities and are described in Dabrowski's theory. These overexcitabilities are not abilities; rather they are modes of experiencing and super sensitivity to stimuli in five areas: Psychomotor, Sensual, Imaginational, Intellectual, and Emotional (Bouchard, 2004). In Bouchard's (2004, p. 480) study, an instrument was created to measure OEs [overexcitabilities]. It found 76 % of gifted students and 42% of non-gifted students to have similar OE measures indicating that the ElemenOE instrument may be useful in identifying gifted students who are often missed by traditional measures.

Using multiple criteria and information sources to identify gifted students is often seen as another type of alternate or nontraditional assessment (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). Part of this process, as seen by VanTassel-Baska et al (2007), includes the combined use of such instruments as portfolios, interviews, performance tasks, nontraditional standardized measures, inventories, and checklists. This method is found especially successful when assessing low-income and minority students when identifying gifted students (VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, & Avery, 2002; VanTassel-Baska et al, 2007).

Borland (1997) finds "a warming by educators to the notion that we need to augment our use of standardized tests in assessing students." Callahan (2005) also sees expanding our identification process by examination of all the ways we conceptualize



aptitude and intelligence, or as Renzulli (2002, p. 65) proposes – look at giftedness through a “wide angle lens.”

Though not an assessment tool for giftedness, Gardner’s *Multiple Intelligence Theory* is used to expand the concept of cognitive ability and the way students view themselves (Gardner & Moran, 2006; Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006). According to Gardner (Moran et al, 2006), the multiple intelligences theory was originally developed as an explanation of how the mind works — not as an education policy. Through *Multiple Intelligences Theory*, students can perceive themselves as potentially smart in a number of ways. Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences include linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential (Gardner & Moran, 2006; Moran et al, 2006). It demonstrates that since students bring to the classroom diverse intellectual profiles, one "IQ" measure is insufficient to evaluate, label, and plan education programs for all students.

The use of alternative assessments for giftedness are considered by many to be a possible answer to underrepresentation of minority students; however, Lopez (1997, p. 250) warns that “hasty adoption of alternative assessments exemplifies enthusiasm rather than sound, scientific educational methods employed to raise academic achievement.” According to Lopez (1997), this warning follows several previously unsuccessful attempts at authentic and performance-based assessment used to assess achievement of minority students.

In the state of Georgia, identification process has expanded over the past decade beyond using ability and achievement testing as the sole determiner for giftedness. Krisel

and Cowan (1997) describe 1991 as a beginning of the state's journey toward a more inclusive identification of giftedness. During that decade, the state's participation in two important projects, one sponsored by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented and one resulting from a grant from the Jacob K. Javits Fellowships Program targeted the identification of gifted students from underrepresented populations (Krisel & Cowan, 1997). After a lengthy and controversial process, the Georgia State Board of Education adopted a highly innovative and expanded model for identifying gifted students using the multiple-criteria rule for eligibility in the gifted program (Krisel & Cowan, 1997).

According to the Georgia State Board of Education, the definition of students eligible for gifted education services in Georgia may be found in "State Board of Education (SBOE) 160-4-2-.38 EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR GIFTED STUDENTS [Code IDDD(2)]" (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). The Georgia Department of Education (2008) policy states:

A gifted student is a student who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability(ies), exhibits an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excels in specific academic fields, and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with his or her abilities (SBOE Rule 160-4-2-.38, p. 1).

The eligibility criteria for gifted program placement are also provided in SBOE Rule 160-4-2-.38 (Georgia Department of Education, 2008). The multiple criteria used to determine eligibility for a student to be placed in the gifted program in the state of

Georgia is determined by meeting the performance standards in three of four categories for assessment — mental abilities assessment, achievement assessment, creativity, and motivation.

In screening for intellectual giftedness the use of a single criterion has been shown to identify fewer than half of the gifted children in a given population (Ryan, 1983). Georgia is recognized by the Davidson Institute (Davidson Institute, 2006) as one of only four states implementing a multiple-criteria approach to gifted identification. Many researchers within the state and internationally are continuing to investigate and study alternate methods in hopes of identifying more underrepresented populations of gifted students.

With a broad, shifting paradigm for defining giftedness, it is important that the means used for determining giftedness reflect criteria set by these shifts (Baldwin, 2002; Bouchard, 2004; Renzulli, 2002). Recognizing that giftedness is something we confer on children and not something discovered in children, a climate of change has significantly affected the perspective of giftedness in all students (Borland, 1997).

#### Parental Partnership, Advocacy, and Community Connections

It is noted in research that a contributing reason for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is missing parental partnerships, parental advocacy, and community connections with schools (Craig, Connor, & Washington, 2003; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Grantham, Frasier, Roberts, & Bridge, 2005; Howard, 2002; Nelson, 2001; Smith & Smith, 1997; Taylor, 2003; Thompson, 2003; Washington, 2001). While researchers (Baker, 1999; Black, 2006; Ford & Trotman, 2001; Gay, 2002; Kunjufu, 2002; Payne, 1998; Slocum & Payne, 2000; Van Bockern, 2006; Waxman,

Huang, Anderson, & Weistein, 1997) point to the importance of relationships within the school as key to student achievement, factors such as parental partnerships and advocacy with schools are seen as equally important to the academic success of all students, especially the successful academic achievement of minority students.

Most examples of parental partnership and advocacy for their children's education are based upon the parents' own concepts of academic success (Ablard, 1996). According to Ablard (1996), these concepts can range from concern over students' high performance on achievement tests, grades, and obtaining personal goals to students' enjoyment, motivation, curiosity, and individual academic potential. Parents are recognized as one of the most supportive advocacy groups and promising resources available to assist in making improvements in gifted and talented programs (Ablard, 1996). Grantham et al.(2005) described six case studies conducted on successful advocacy events conducted on behalf of gifted and talented children. One characteristic of effective advocacy is the leadership that emerges from educators and parent advocacy groups concerning equity in gifted programs (Grantham et al., 2005). Grantham et al. cite research that refers to these leaders as "champion" parents.

Chandler (2007) describes African American parents who organized an effective parent advocacy group in support of their high achieving children. In his article, Chandler described the grassroots organization, called Club 2012, as a parent advocacy group that embraced their role as advocates for their own children and also as leaders who train other minority parents to be effective advocates for their own children (Chandler, 2007). The group's goal was to raise their children's academic confidence and expectations for advanced achievement, specifically on standardized tests, thus enabling them to qualify

for honor's classes (Chandler, 2007). While most people think that talented students will be successful no matter what education they receive (Ablard, 1996), many tend to simply accept the judgment of professionals (Smith & Smith, 1997). The parents of a gifted minority student wrote, "Had we not been steadfast advocates for their child, she would not be given the opportunity [to participate in the enrichment program] (Smith & Smith, 1997). Minority parent advocacy groups like Club 2012 are teaching minority parents how to speak out and join with schools on behalf of their children, and by playing a part in increasing student success and high achievement (Chandler, 2007), the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs may be addressed.

Baldwin (2002) found that the presence of parental partnerships can play an important role in the identification, program development, and evaluation of programs designed for gifted students from diverse backgrounds. In one pilot study designed to improve the identification process of minority students, the parents were specifically involved in part of an observation process designed to look for behaviors often associated with giftedness (Pierce et al., 2007). Baldwin (2002, p. 146) referenced a 1984 study of Head Start students from culturally diverse backgrounds whose parents were trained in using activities to develop areas defined as indicators of giftedness in their young children. According to Baldwin, these parents were also taught to recognize potential for giftedness in their children. Baldwin further explained that many of these children, who are often underrepresented in gifted programs, were among those later nominated for gifted programs. When schools include parents of minority students in the gifted program identification and placement decision-making process, students stand a greater chance of not being overlooked (Grantham, Frasier, Roberts, & Bridges, 2005).

With parental involvement now being recognized as a factor in creating higher levels of student achievement and an increase in motivation in students, parent-school involvement is recommended as an essential component of educational reform (Ablard, 1996). Shumow (1997, p. 39) cites research where implementing parent workshops is seen as a contributor to the increase in student motivation and cognitive skills, especially in inner city gifted students. Additional studies also demonstrate the important role parents play in influencing success and achievement or failure and under-achievement of gifted minority children (Campbell, 1999; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Huff, Houskamp, Watkins, Stanton, & Travegia, 2005). Huff et al. (2005) explain that minority parents, by representing support and care to their children, directly impact motivation, expectations, and advocacy when they create partnerships with schools. This collaborative effort improves the academic, socio-emotional, and resources to nurture the gifts and talents of minority students (Huff et al., 2005).

In 1981, several years after his 1972 Marland Report to Congress, Sidney P. Marland issued a charge to parents of gifted students stating:

If you are in a situation where you believe the schools are unresponsive to the needs of your child, and if indeed you have firm evidence of your child's exceptional characteristics beyond your own subjective prejudice, you can help the schools to make the necessary changes...School leaders and teachers need your help and companionship in serving the needs of your child (Grantham et al, 2005).

Today, these sentiments resound even more for minority students who often lack parental involvement (Grantham et al, 2005) when involved in achieving their highest potential.

Grantham (2003) explains his *Gifted Program Advocacy Model (G-PAM)* as a design that works with parents of culturally diverse students and guides their advocacy efforts. The four phase plan, according to Grantham, includes (a) needs assessment, (b) development of a plan, (c) implementation, and (d) follow-up and evaluation. Grantham sees parent advocacy as a key factor in reversing the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, and he describes the parents' role as critical in holding schools accountable for administering gifted program policies and services that promote excellence and equity for all students.

Rimm (1996) describes another advocacy model, *Parenting for Achievement*, as a course designed to help parents guide their children toward achievement and self-confidence. In the implementation of the model, Rimm (1996) also explains that fostering a close home and school relationship where parents learn how to advocate for their gifted children without becoming adversarial can be a key element toward guiding children toward academic achievement.

Minority students are seen as beneficiaries of parent advocacy (Huff et al., 2005), and Grantham, Frasier, Roberts, and Bridges (2005) contend that this partnership is a benefit to schools. Grantham et al. describe these benefits as (a) helping teachers to understand the diversity of student needs, (b) collaboration between parents and teachers that increase the likelihood of consistency of academic and social expectations, (c) a more complete understanding by all of gifted behaviors, especially those behaviors of culturally diverse students manifested inside and outside of school, and (d) providing parents as nonpartisan stakeholders in addressing needs of minority students. According to Huff et al. (2005), parents perceive that their comfort with the educational system

created avenues for them to access services and interact with teachers which ultimately maximized the benefits to their children. All these benefits do appear to be effective tools in increasing academic achievement of minority students and logically lead to an effective way of addressing the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs.

In contrast to encouraging parental partnership, Harmon and Ford (2001) found that when the partnership between the home and school is not fostered, then the lack of parental partnership and advocacy is seen. Even though the importance of parental involvement is well documented, few schools consistently and aggressively build partnerships with minority families concerning gifted programs (Ford & Harmon, 2001). Huff et al (2005) found in their study that parents must often go the extra mile in order to establish a working relationship with the school. The underachievement and overachievement of African American children is correlated with parents who have frequent contact with schools (Huff et al, 2005). Actions such as holding meetings to educate minority parents on the purpose of gifted programs or teaching minority parents how to advocate for their child's placement in gifted programs are seldom practiced by schools (Ford & Harmon, 2001).

Developing and sustaining parental involvement cannot occur if teachers, principals, and schools do not promote environments of trust, acceptance, and warmth for parents coming from different cultural backgrounds (Milner & Ford, 2007). One parent summarized an encounter at a school stating, "There are a lot of Black children who have fallen through the cracks simply because the schools are not receptive. It's like a guarded secret" (Huff et al., 2005, p. 17). Unfortunately, many schools have networks of parents, teachers, and children that influence the classroom and school community (Polite &



Saenger, 2003). Polite and Saenger (2003) describe this feeling or atmosphere of “insiders” and “outsiders” that can lead to resentment by those not included, especially if those excluded are from minority groups within the school and those in the included group are in the majority.

Several studies on parental partnership with schools (Rubie-Davies, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2006; Thompson, 2003) also determined that educators are not always the most reliable or accurate judges of effective parent partnership with schools. Rubie-Davies et al. (2006) cited cases where teachers, as a means of exonerating themselves from student failure, would often hold home influences as the primary reason for their students’ poor academic achievement. Shumow (1997) quotes extensive literature that document numerous contributions made by families as part of their children’s academic achievement. Contributions included proactive actions such as stability, awareness of academic progress, help with homework, discussions about school, and taking their children to the public library (Shumow, 1997).

Huff et al. (2005) contend that if parents feel intimidated or ineffective in the gifted process, they tend to become inactive and decrease their needed advocacy. Often a parent’s education influences their knowledge of the educational system and has an effect on their ability to intervene in the educational system on their child’s behalf (Eccles, 2005). Many parents already feel inadequate or embarrassed when comparing their own skills with those of their high achieving children (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2007). When questioned, African American parents of identified gifted students acknowledged that the majority of African American children who might benefit from consideration for the gifted program are often neglected or overlooked (Huff et al., 2005). Controversy does

exist over the underrepresented of minority students in gifted programs, and for some, the focuses remains on whether the causes include deficiencies in the children and their families or on the policies and practices of schools and society that restrict the search for minority giftedness (Ford & Harmon, 2001).

While parental partnership and advocacy have been shown to be important factors in addressing the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, research also indicates that a student's family background is an important contributor to his or her academic success in school (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). The role of family and extended family as support structures help to stress to minority and low income students the value of education, a work ethic, and offer monitoring of the student's education (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). In addressing the academic outcomes of minority students, cultural factors, social factors, school factors, and individual factors are all seen as variables that influence the academic achievement of minority students (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). Huff et al. (2005) found that presenting a team effort or offering a village approach involving all adults from all areas affecting a minority child helps to improve his or her academic achievement. Moore et al.(2005) states that educators must use the holistic approach in meeting the academic needs of students of color. The authors included in this holistic approach not only the cognitive and academic needs but also the student's identity, friends, sense of belonging, and safety. Therefore, it is logical to assume that attention to all these factors – cultural, social, school, and individual – influence academic outcomes and achievement, and will ultimately impact the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs.

According to Ford & Harmon (2001) underachievement is learned and when one equates giftedness with high achievement, gifted under-achievers will be under-referred for gifted education. Begoray and Slovinsky (1997) state that, in reality, a disproportionate percentage of minority students live in poverty and that living in poverty is a predominate reason why students underachieve. It is not due to lack of intelligence; rather, it is due to lack of opportunity (Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997) and resources (Payne, 1998; Robinson, Lanzi, Weinberg, Ramey, & Ramey, 2002). Eccles (2005) states that when income and residence are compounded, the types of schools and the neighborhood opportunities and risks offered to children influence their educational achievement. Eccles (2005) asserts that if parents trust the school and neighborhoods, then their children participate fully in resources and learning activities that could facilitate their educational achievement. In contrast, Eccles (2005) found that if parents believe their neighborhood is quite dangerous and risky, their children are kept home making it difficult for them to engage fully in learning opportunities provided by schools.

In discussion of cultural factors, Moore et al. (2005) defined culture as a set of beliefs, values, dispositions, traditions, customs, and habits that are specific to a group, and they serve as a lens through which students view themselves and others. These cultural factors can influence student achievement. Cultural norms may also hinder minority students from achieving their academically (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). Educators are seldom formally prepared for identifying cultural characteristics, and as a result, educators may not recognized giftedness in students of color (Moore et al., 2005).

Cultural issues are critical to minority students, and they may ultimately affect academic achievement. These issues include: (a) low cultural expectations for

achievement manifested in little encouragement and support, (b) peer rejection, (c) conflict generated when seen as succeeding in the “majority” culture and leaving one’s own cultural community behind, (d) lack of long range planning, and (e) lack of career development (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). When high achieving minority students succeed, many times they will be faced with situations and environments where membership or belonging in a group becomes most important, and then, in turn, it can directly impact the student’s achievement (Bennett, Bridglall, Cauce, Everson, Gordon, Lee, et al., 2004). This leads the student into a self-protective strategy to minimize rejection and future prejudice.

In addition to culture, another factor closely linked to underachievement of minority students is social influences (Moore et al., 2005). Moore et al. (2005) states that peer pressure is the most pervasive and recognized social factor for students and ultimately has the highest impact, especially on minority students. African American and Hispanic students seem particularly susceptible to negative opposition from their peers where they are teased as acting white when they are academically successful (Moore et al., 2005). A sense of isolation can occur both within the student’s peer group as well as within the African American community (Huff et al., 2005). Often young, black students lose interest in school and abandon academic pursuits because they do not feel a part of their environment (Chandler, 2007)

Huff et al. (2005) conducted interviews with parents of high achieving or gifted minority students, and many commented on both the cultural and social factors felt by their children. One parent felt that their child experienced a great deal of cultural pressure to underachieve. Another acknowledged that sometimes their child did not want to be

smart. A similar response from a different parent stated that their child wished the perception in their culture was that being smart could be really and truly cool (Huff et al., 2005, p.17). “African Americans are influenced by the stereotype that Black kids are not academically oriented, but to defy the stereotypes, minorities need something else working to show that being black and academically oriented are not at odds... That’s were a parent’s role is important” (Chandler, 2007).

Diverse parents need strategies for helping their children cope with peer pressures and social injustices (Ford & Harmon, 2001). Efforts by schools need to be aggressive and proactive; school personnel need to go into diverse communities, attend minority-sponsored events, and seek the support of minority churches and corporations (2001). In *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement* (National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, 1999, p. 34), recommendations were given to national and local minority organization and minority parents to advocate and press for growth in the number of underrepresented minority students who are superior performers in schools. The National Task Force on Minority High Achievement (1999, p. 34) further challenges leaders of minority organizations to build and strengthen their capacity to provide minority parents and community minority organizations with successful information and strategies used by others to raise minority achievement and successfully provide supplemental [gifted] education for minority children.

Though cultural and social influences do have an impact on minority achievement, the resistance of participating in academically enriched programs by some gifted and high achieving African American students might emanate not only from peer influence, but from the school itself (Morris, 2002). Consider this certainty (Storti, 1999,

p. 16), “Each of us is like everybody else in some ways, like the people in our culture, and like no one else at all.”

Morris (2002) contends that when African American children go to schools with White children, the cultural norms of White America dominate, causing tension or a duality of identity for minority high achieving students. He further questions whether African American students should temporarily ignore their cultural identities and become race less so they can participate in gifted programs. Grantham and Ford (2003) describe this dilemma faced by gifted minority children as a psychological and social-emotional tug-of-war. Some Black students may attempt to sabotage their achievement and simply choose not to be in gifted programs (Grantham & Ford, 2003). This sabotage often results because gifted programs are almost completely filled by White students, and their friends are not in the gifted programs (Morris, 2002).

Grantham and Ford (2003) contend that Black students who do not have a healthy racial identity are likely to succumb to the negative peer pressures and refuse gifted programs because they are not willing to make that sacrifice (Morris, 2002). Based on the results of a longitudinal study, many highest-achieving minority students were not only academically successful but possessed motivational and social assets as well (Robinson et al., 2002). Racial identity development and high achievement among gifted minority students has a positive correlation (Moore et al., 2005). As minority students approach the age of extreme peer pressure, it is even more essential that minority children have the support of parents, teachers, and access to high-achieving friends who can help them maintain their motivation to academically succeed (Robinson et al., 2002).

When giftedness is defined unidimensionally, as a function of high IQ scores, or equated with achievement then an important reality is ignored: gifted minority students have a conflict between the need for achievement and the need for affiliation, thus contributing to underachievement (Ford & Harmon, 2001). According to researchers (Ford & Harmon, 2001; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Morris, 2002) evidence of peer pressure and issues of racial identity are found in the current underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education. It is a notion described by researchers as a pyrrhic victory for minority students – it is a victory gained as a ruinous loss (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Moore et al., 2005).

### Teachers' Beliefs and Expectations

#### *Recognizing Barriers and Beliefs.*

According to the *National Excellence* report of 1993, “outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor”(U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Despite work of legislations and initiatives, including the *Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program Act* of 1988, the *National Excellence* report of 1993, and *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, the talents of minority students remain underrepresented in the gifted programs (Baldwin, 2002; Bernal, 2002; Callahan, 2005; de Wet, 2006; Elhoweris et al, 2005; Ford & Grantham, 1996; Ford & Harmon, 2001; Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005; Lohman, 2005; Passow & Frasier, 1996; Renzulli, 2005; Sarouphim, 2004; VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, & Avery, 2002; Winebrenner, 2001).

The magnitude of the problem of underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program can not be ignored, and for the past 70 years, the issues surrounding the

underrepresentation of African American students in gifted education have been the fuel for much discussion and debate (Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005; Jenkins, 1935; Kearney & LeBlanc, 1993). In a national field test study, Frasier, Hunsaker, Lee, Finley, Frank, Garcia, & Martin (1995) investigated barriers to the identification of diverse gifted students. The field study was conducted on 750 educators. In the study (Frasier et al., 1995), two major barriers to the identification of diverse gifted students were identified including: (a) test bias, and (b) teachers' inability to recognize indicators of potential in certain groups. In a later interview exploring the reasons for underrepresentation in gifted programs, Frasier discussed the study and the attitudes it uncovered that create barriers for students underrepresented in the gifted program (Swanson, 2006, p. 11). These barriers, Frasier explains, include the creation of certain prerequisites for admission into the gifted program, including the assumption that gifted students typically have two college-educated parents, are White, and live in the suburbs (Swanson, 2006, p.11).

While many barriers to identification of diverse gifted students do exist, Swanson (2006) contends that teacher's beliefs and assumptions regarding high-poverty, high-minority students become gates that block the entry of such students into gifted programs. Teachers can become gatekeepers, according to Swanson (2006, p.11), to gifted programs; as a result, their attitudes and views of children can be a key to why some gifted minority students are not entering the gate. The view that students who are African-American are "deprived," "disadvantaged," and lack what it takes to be high achievers is a deficit view and continues to be a barrier to minority students who are gifted (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Swanson, 2006). Additionally, Swanson



notes that lack of rigorous and challenging curriculum for all students blocks potential high achievement.

Teachers sometimes have negative attitudes toward children from different cultures and diverse backgrounds, and these students are often overlooked for the gifted and talented program (Elhoweris et al, 2005). According to Elhoweris et al. (2005), the stereotypical beliefs of teachers about what an African American student is capable of achieving may be effectively barring some African American gifted youngsters from participating in the gifted program.

Elhoweris et al. (2005) have stated, through their research that factors such as a student's ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status affect teachers' expectations and behaviors. Elhoweris et al. (2005, p. 26) referenced numerous studies conducted on teachers' roles in gifted referral, with finding that indicate teachers tend to evaluate African-American, Hispanic American, and poor students' academic performance and behavior in a biased manner. Today there is also a discrepancy between the makeup of the student population and the teaching force (Elhoweris et al., 2005) with 80% to 90% of teachers being European American and middle class, while the student population is growing in its diversity.

In a recent national study, de Wet (2006) surveyed teachers from eight states to determine their beliefs about culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in gifted programs. Citing Pajares' 1992 study on teachers' beliefs, de Wet (2006, p. 181) found that an individual's beliefs can develop into values and that an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and values make up his or her belief system

Today people of color collectively comprise almost one third of the U. S. population (Milner & Ford, 2005). A dramatic demographic shift in the United States, in terms of racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity, is very apparent in American public schools (Brown, 2007). This change, according to Brown (2007), is not the problem; instead, Brown found that the problem lies in the way educators have responded to that change. This change in the racial or ethnic demography of our society has compelled educator, social scientists, policy makers, and others to rethink beliefs and practices (Milner & Ford, 2005). Teachers cannot be expected to change their beliefs, knowledge, and actions based on a change process that consists primarily of policy statements; instead, teachers must believe in what they are doing and must believe in their students' ability to learn. A positive or negative response by a teacher could affect the academic success of diverse students (Brown, 2007). Therefore, teacher beliefs, as linked to their actions or responses, are shaped from their biases, their thinking, and their expectations of students (Baker, 1999; Bell, 2002; de Wet, 2006; Gay, 2002; Grantham et al., 2005; Jamar & Pitts, 2005; Payne, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004; Siegle, 2001; & Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997), and would certainly impact the representation of minority students in the gifted program. In spite of massive attempts at school reform and restructuring, teacher ideologies and beliefs often remain unchanged, particularly toward African American students and their intellectual potential (Jamar & Pitts, 2005, p. 129.)

#### *Deficit Perspective*

In her dissertation study on teachers' beliefs, de Wet (2006) found that teachers have a significant influence on the success or failure of their students. Through their lived

experiences, teachers form beliefs, attitudes, and actions that influence the instructional practices and goals in their classrooms (de Wet, 2006, p. 9). Teachers can be role models of activism and concern and should never forget the power of the roles they play in children's lives for good or for ill (Polite & Saenger, 2003). Researchers, Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2002) explain that the underrepresentation of certain groups in gifted programs indicates a deficit perspective or what Grantham and Ford (2003) call deficit thinking by teachers. Educators that exhibit a deficit orientation in thinking fail to see a student's true academic ability (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). Deficit-oriented philosophy hinders educators from seeing the potential of diverse students and prohibits them from working effectively with such students (Ford & Harmon, 2001, p. 141). When cultural differences are not perceived as deficits, then teachers are able to see strengths more readily in diverse students (Milner, 2005). According to Milner (2005), these teachers are likely to refer culturally diverse students for gifted screening and these teachers serve as cultural bridges and advocates for diverse students.

Perceptions about differences among students manifest themselves in various ways, and exert a powerful influence in educational settings (Ford & Harmon, 2001, p. 141.) When teachers are asked to consider a student's demonstration of giftedness, this inherent bias leads to a focus on skill achievement and cognition (Endepohls-Ulpe & Ruf, 2005), rather than creativity, leadership, and motor skills (Siegle, 2001). Some students may even be gifted in just one area of performance rather than exhibiting outstanding abilities in all areas (Callahan, 2005). According to Siegle (2001) teachers need help understanding that there isn't an all-purpose gifted child and that children do not always

exhibit gifted characteristics in all aspects of their lives. This acknowledgement may also increase teachers' recognition of strengths over weaknesses (Siegle, 2001).

Teachers are seldom provided with skills to discern alternate manifestations of giftedness or skills to detect verbal talents in students lacking fluency and verbal expressiveness (Callahan, 2005). In order to understand and recognize giftedness in students and in culturally diverse students in particular, teachers must first have a sense of what giftedness means. Students from different cultures exhibit gifts and talents differently, but perceived cultural and linguistic weaknesses by teachers may limit these students' opportunities for consideration in the gifted program (Siegle, 2001). Classroom teachers should be asked to identify characteristics that indicate giftedness rather than look for reasons why children are not gifted (Siegle, 2001).

Alder (2000, p. 29) cited work done by Gay that described the danger of "missionary effect" where teachers assume they know best about the educational needs of minority students, when they actually know little about their culture. Not only is understanding culture a factor in student achievement, Elhoweris et al (2005) cited research that determined that the race of teachers was associated with their expectations for student achievement, and African American teachers had significantly higher expectations for minority students. Teachers who do not listen to students and learn about their culture may actually be contributing to what appears as minority student's resistance to academic achievement (Alder, 2000). Teachers must move beyond what is often called culture-blindness and think about how theirs and their students' culture influence what happens in the classroom; otherwise, when color-blind ideologies are adopted, young

children of color are rendered invisible and their strengths may not be seen (Milner & Ford, 2007).

There are, however, classroom teachers who are often the first one to recognize ability in students and refer them for assessment and inclusion in gifted programs (de Wet, 2006; National Association of Gifted Children, 2007a). Brown et al (2005) supports teachers who challenge traditional thinking by describing their beliefs and their experiences with high performance and creativity among under-served or underrepresented students.

Studies have also been conducted comparing teachers who have had experience in teaching gifted children and teachers without experience teaching gifted students (Endepohls-Ulpe & Ruf, 2005). In a study on teacher biases when identifying gifted and talented students, it was discovered that gifted and talented teacher specialists tended to rate students higher than classroom teachers (Powell & Siegle, 2000). These teachers possibly concentrate more on the positive aspects or strengths of the students versus their weaknesses (Powell & Siegle, 2000).

Discrepancies can be found between the two groups of teachers on their opinions concerning criteria for identification of giftedness (Endepohls-Ulpe & Ruf, 2005). According to Endepohls-Ulpe and Ruf (2005), the differences are often in teachers' opinions of students' social behavior as an indicator, positive or negative, for giftedness and the connection of intelligence, motivation, and achievement at school. Teachers with experience in teaching gifted children seem to see giftedness in children in a more precise and realistic way (Endepohls-Ulpe & Ruf, 2005). Classroom teachers, who are often

placed in diagnostic and remediation roles with students, may be more sensitive to student weaknesses due to past experiences (Siegle, 2001).

Callahan (2005) states that teachers are seldom provided skills in discerning alternate ways in which students may be gifted. Even the use of a checklist of gifted characteristics may help teachers see behaviors beyond those usually associated with the conventional gifted student and thereby gives students a chance to reveal gifted (Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997) The acceptance by educators of a very narrow conception of intelligence and giftedness can create diminished beliefs in the potential of ethnic minority and low-income students (Callahan, 2005). The core of teachers' concepts of giftedness lies in the field of cognition (Endepohls-Ulpe & Ruf, 2005). In terms of meeting the needs of culturally diverse and gifted students, Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005), state that a holistic approach is essential where teachers consider students' cognitive, academic, affective, psychological, cultural, and social aspects. Teachers often fail to see potential in a student who is very different from others in dress, attitude, or speech pattern (Begoray & Solvinsky, 1997; Rist, 1970); and diverse students were expected to check their cultures at the classroom door and assume the style of the majority culture (Brown, 2007).

Swanson (2006) sees teachers' assumptions, beliefs and attitudes about high-poverty, high-minority, diverse students as gates that block entry of these minority students into the gifted program behaviors. Teachers, who are often seen as the gatekeepers of gifted referrals, have an impact on the representation of minority students in the gifted program (Callahan, 2005; Grantham, 2002; Grantham & Ford, 2003; McBee, 2006; Swanson, 2006). According to McBee (2006), most school districts require that a

student be referred for gifted placement. While automatic referrals are the most common referral source, McBee (2006) noted that teacher referrals make up the majority of the remaining gifted referral sources. In addition to low test scores and student and family choice, Grantham and Ford (2003) found that African American students being poorly represented in gifted education is from a lack of teacher referral and attribute this deficit thinking – focusing on Black student’s differences and weaknesses rather than strengths – to the lack of referral. When teacher referral is the first or only recruitment step, diverse students are likely to be underrepresented in gifted programs (Ford & Harmon, 2001).

Results from a study conducted by Elhoweris et al. (2005) indicated that a student’s ethnicity does make a difference in the teachers’ referral decisions. In their study, (Elhoweris et al., 2005) elementary teachers were given vignette or short, descriptive pieces of information on students being considered for gifted placement. The information on the students was identical except for differing ethnicities of the students. The teachers made different recommendations for placement in gifted and talented programs based on ethnicity, suggesting that teachers rely on informal information, such as a child’s ethnicity, when making referral decisions (Elhoweris et al., 2005, p.29). The researchers further state that these results may add to the reasons why children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds are underrepresented in gifted programs. It also creates a potential link between teachers’ biases against African American students and their disproportionately low numbers in gifted programs (Elhoweris et al., 2005). If teachers enhance their cultural awareness, then this pursuit of cultural competence may assist teachers in uncovering hidden beliefs, biases, prejudices, and values that may cause them to misunderstand their own cultural existence in education and ultimately contribute

to the disproportionately lower numbers of students of color in gifted education (Milner & Ford, 2007).

*Biases and Stereotypes.*

The inherent or preconceived beliefs of teachers often play a role in the underrepresentation of students from diverse backgrounds in the gifted program (Alder, 2000; Baker, 1999; Bell, 2002; Callahan, 2005; de Wet, 2006; Gay, 2002; Payne, 1998; Siegle, 2001; & Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997). According to Elhoweris et al., (2005, p. 26), previous studies have shown that teachers and the general public have negative stereotypes and inaccurate perceptions of the abilities of children from different cultural backgrounds. A common belief is that there are few students who come from ethnic minority groups or from poverty who are capable of developing into gifted students (Callahan, 2005). If a teacher holds stereotypical or preconceived ideas about diverse students, then the beliefs of that teacher will likely impact several areas – a minority student’s performance, the teacher’s evaluation of the student, and the way the teacher interprets the test and performance of that student (Joseph & Ford, 2006). Brown (2007, p. 60) describes a classroom that “acknowledges the presence of culturally diverse student and the needs of these students to find connections among themselves, the subject matter, and the tasks assigned” as a culturally responsive classroom. One of the most important aspects of this type of classroom, according to Brown (2007), is the teacher beliefs and understanding that culturally, linguistically, and diverse students want to learn and that their behavior can lead to improved academic achievement and create success for all students.



According to Aronson (2004), it has long been known that when stereotypes are believed, they can produce expectations about what people are like and how they will act. When teachers hold such expectations, their beliefs can influence the performance of their students. Alder (2000) contends that African Americans labeled as gifted were treated differently than their majority counterparts, and this is a form of prejudice, further suggesting that teachers must confront their personal biases and issues of race to free themselves of the negative effects on their students. Otherwise, this leaves teachers relying on preconceived stereotypes which result in inherent biases (Siegle, 2001), and may logically impact decisions such as gifted referral. In their classrooms, teachers are constant decision makers, and throughout the process, their beliefs, attitudes, and priorities provide a framework for their decision-making (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004).

In his seminal work on the effects of stereotypes, Steele (1997) noted that African Americans contend with negative stereotypes about their abilities in many scholastic domains. Steele (1997) further explains that a social-psychological threat arises when an individual [or member of a particular group] is in a situation or is doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies. Called stereotype threat, this "threat in the air" (Steele, 1997, p. 614) can be felt sharply enough to hamper the [student's] achievement. In the classroom, stereotype threat makes students anxious and depresses their performance on challenging tasks such as standardized tests (Aronson, 2004). McKown and Weinstein (2003) found that children from academically stigmatized ethnic groups show earlier and greater awareness of stereotypes, and that this awareness is highly consequential to these children's responses to stereotypical situations

such as standardized testing. Standardized tests are often the primary instrument used in the identification process for gifted programs. The findings from McKowen and Weinstein's (2003) study raise important questions about the impact high-stakes testing might have on educational equality.

Steele (1997) sees stereotype threat having an especially strong affect on those individuals who act as vanguards, leaders, or front-runners of a negatively stereotyped group because these individuals have the skills and self-confidence to identify with a desired domain. In the academic or scholastic domain where school success or high achievement are desired, the tenets of stereotype threat might lead one to believe that high-achieving minority students, or what Steele (1997) calls the vanguards of the diversity in the classroom, may feel the greatest effects of stereotype threat especially when they are exposed to people in that classroom environment that doubt their abilities.

Based on his study of negative stereotyping, Aronson (2004) contends that human intellectual performance is far more fragile than is customarily thought. Therefore, understanding and minimizing stereotype threat has the prospect of helping educators improve academic achievement (Aronson, 2004; Steele, 1997), especially with groups such as African American students who Steele (1997) believes must frequently contend with negative stereotype threat.

When an environment is created that fosters feelings of trust, belonging, and acceptance of potential, then intellectual capacities and motivations are influenced in a positive way (Aronson, 2004; Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997). Howard (2002, p. 436) cites the writings of Noddings in saying, "it is obvious the children will work harder and do things... for people they love and trust." Manthey (2003) reports that when studies are done of

students who have become high achieving, despite “all the odds,” what is discovered is that at least one person in their lives inspired and expected much from them.

In detailing a qualitative study on learning environments that promote high achievement, Howard (2002) described the views of elementary and secondary African American students about high achievement in school. In the study (2002, p. 428) students expressed three key themes that related to this success in school: (a) the importance of relationships between teachers and students directly affected academic achievement, (b) the effect of teachers’ positive responses to students’ personal lives which led to increased efforts at school, and (c) the preference for teachers’ encouragement toward students to actualize their ideas and encouraged engagement in the classroom. In the same article, Howard (2002) further describes the types of teachers and teaching styles leading to academic achievement as: (a) the presence of family, community, and home characteristics, (b) culturally connected caring, (c) verbal communication and affirmation. It is clear that teacher warmth and support have unparalleled power to help children adjust and achieve (Black, 2006). Recent brain research offers much insight into promoting maximum potential for all children (Henderson & Ebner, 1997). Henderson and Ebner (1997) found environments most conducive to the development of giftedness are ones in which adults are most responsive and nurturing to a child’s academic behaviors.

Few teacher education programs provide coursework or preparation on understanding cultural and economic diversity; therefore, teachers enter the profession unprepared to recognize those distinctive characteristics (Huff et al, 2005; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). Gay (2002) claims that due to their lack of understanding of diverse

students, their culture, and the behavioral structures of their lives, teachers fail to practice culturally responsive teaching. This lack of understanding has an affect on students from diverse backgrounds, leading to poor academic achievement (Gay, 2002; Payne, 1998). To increase the number of appropriate referrals to programs for gifted and talented students, Elhoweris et al. (2005) cites the recommendations that general educator's knowledge of cultural factors should be increased, multicultural education should be emphasized in teacher education programs, and an assistance should be given to teachers as they assess their own biases to raise awareness of its effects on evaluation of diverse students. Teachers who understand culture, who are familiar with the functions of culture, and who are aware of the dimensions of culture are less likely to experience what Milner (2005) calls a cultural mismatch between teachers (the majority of whom are Caucasian) and culturally diverse students. It is this mismatch, states Milner (2005) that results in underrepresentation of diverse students in gifted education.

### *Teacher Expectations*

According to de Wet (2006) and Rist (1970), teachers' beliefs and attitudes influence instructional practices, goals, or in other words, their actions. Teacher expectations affect teachers' behaviors and consequently have an impact on student achievement (Alder, 2000; Kuklinski & Weintein, 2001). Teacher expectations, when influenced by deficit thinking and biases, can negatively influence student achievement and performance (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). According to Milner and Ford (2005) teachers are not prepared for issues such as teacher expectations and how it equates to student achievement; rather, many have developed the habit of not taking any responsibility for students' poor achievement. Elhoweris et al (2005, p. 30) and Kuklinski

and Weinstein (2001) explain the impact of the well-known expectancy theory, Merton's 1948 writings on self-fulfilling prophecy, where it is argued that what teachers expect of students influences what students expect of themselves. In discussing the relationship between expectations and self-fulfilling prophecy, Rubie-Davies et al. (2006) states that teacher expectations are often based on student characteristics such as ethnicity or gender. "Too often minority students have been victims of teachers' low expectations and the students' achievement mirrored these expectations. High expectations manifested through words and deeds are necessary if all students are to reach high levels..." (Jamar & Pitts, 2005, p. 130).

When beliefs, thinking, and biases are manifested in low expectations, then teaching practices impede student achievement (Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Researchers cite examples of the impact teacher expectations have on student achievement in the classroom (Alder, 2000; Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997; Callahan, 2005; Gottfredson, Birdseye, Gottfredson, & Marciniak, 1995; Jamar & Pitts, 2005; Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2001; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006). Whether or not a teacher engages students in meaningful, challenging tasks depends on how the teacher perceives the abilities of the students (Jamar & Pitts, 2005). Callahan contends that there is a strong belief that minority students and students from poverty are so lacking in basic skills or abilities that development of giftedness is highly unlikely. Begoray and Slovinsky (1997) contend that it is difficult to identify the giftedness in students when they are reduced to low expectation tasks such as copying notes from overheads or complete pages of basic computation. The focus of instruction often becomes stuck in low-level, mundane,

uninteresting, unmotivating learning tasks instead of creative, critical, analytic, and high-level thinking and problem-solving (Callahan, 2005).

Current emphasis on raising achievement scores has increased the amount of drill and practice in classrooms and counter to what is needed by learners with high potential (Coleman & Southern, 2006). Spending longer time on practicing what is already known decreases the time that could be spent at an appropriate level and diminishes chances for accelerated achievement (Coleman & Southern, 2006). Project or authentic learning provides opportunities for students to become engaged and show their interests, talents, and abilities (Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997). To hold high expectations of minority students often involves sending subtle messages such as: (a) using students' prior knowledge to let them know they have the foundation needed to achieve, (b) expecting students to be active participants and take responsibility for learning, and (c) providing opportunities for students to understand and making it clear that the teacher knows the students can understand (Jamar & Pitts, 2005).

Rist (1970), in his qualitative study of teacher expectations, found that teachers' expectations of a pupil's academic performance may have a strong influence on the actual performance of the student. In his study (Rist, 1970) found that teachers spent less time in close proximity to perceived low achievers. Students who were seen as successful were those who closely fit teachers' criteria for the ideal type of successful child. Alder (2000) cites research that indicates the fact that teachers show preference for students whose learning styles matched their own. Also, certain attributes such as physical appearance, dress, mannerisms, and language that the individual teacher associated with success were based on the teacher's perceptions of the larger society (Rist, 1970).

Teachers may assume that students are not gifted based on their language proficiency, differing values, aspirations, and motivation (Elhoweris et al., 2005). Student characteristics such as physical attractiveness, race, socioeconomic status, and use of Standard English are also related to the degree of discrepancy between teacher expectations for academic success and actual achievement (Gottfredson et al., 1995). Gottfredson et al., (1995) cited an earlier study that found that teachers attributed the academic success of perceived high achievers to ability and the academic success of perceived low achievers to luck, thus making it difficult for perceived low achievers to change their teachers' expectations.

Moore et al. (2005) contends that this deficit thinking of cultural diversity may also prevent educators from recognizing giftedness in diverse groups of students. Teachers often possess a narrow, personal conception of giftedness and therefore cannot accept alternate expressions of giftedness (Callahan, 2005). African American parents report that teachers of their gifted children are often unaware of individual differences in students' talents, inexperienced with students' uneven development, and unfamiliar with personality and cultural characteristics of gifted African American children (Huff et al., 2005). Huff et al. (2005) discovered from minority parents that they felt teachers misperceived gifted students as oppositional, challenging to authority, incapable of acceleration, and apathetic. One parent attributed apathy on the teacher's part to a fear that these children know more than [the teacher] knows (Huff et al., 2005).

Studies clearly show the existence of differential teachers' expectations for individuals in their classrooms (Rubie-Davies, 2006); however, Rubie-Davis (2006) does point out that there is debate in literature and research in on the impact these expectations

have on student achievement. In one study, Kuklinski and Weinstein (2001, p.1556) report that the question may be, “do teacher expectations cause students’ achievement or do students’ achievement and other characteristics cause teacher expectations?” From their own empirical research, Kuklinski and Weinstein (2001) report some support for indirect effects of teacher expectations on students’ ending achievement.

According to Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton (2006), expectations do exist in regular classroom situations and they can positively and negatively influence student performance and achievement. Students are aware of teachers’ expectations and may respond accordingly; therefore, teachers should be encouraged to examine their beliefs, stereotypes, and consequent expectations to see if these could be variables that ultimately affect their students (Rubie-Davis et al., 2006).

#### Summary

Underrepresentation of minority students continues to plague our educational system with African American and Hispanic students being less than half as likely to be represented in gifted programs as White students (Callahan, 2005). Looking for a means of identifying the underrepresented gifted minority students requires more than an oversimplified and surface-level examination of tests (Callahan, 2005) or consideration of cultural factors, social factors, school factors, and individual factors (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). Instead, it might begin by first questioning and examining teacher assumptions about giftedness (Brown et al., 2005; Morris, 2002). The identification of underrepresented minority students requires examination of deeply held beliefs and longstanding practices of educators, as well as developing a willingness to restructure thinking and behavior (Callahan, 2005). A deep understanding of teachers’ beliefs about



giftedness is particularly important given the potential effect of teachers' beliefs on the kind of students they nominate for participation in gifted programming and the kinds of ability profiles they value in the classroom (Miller, 2005).

Teachers' experiences and their beliefs significantly impact how they perceive their students' potential and their decisions regarding students (Milner & Ford, 2007). When teacher understand their beliefs and are given a new lens to view their students' strengths and talents, they are able to rethink their definitions and meanings of giftedness and talent (Milner & Frod, 2007), and can be seen as vigilant in looking for hints of a pearl within the shell (Begoray & Slovinsky, 1997).

Teacher should not be placed in a position to shoulder the entire responsibility for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Instead, there are many different players (Milner & Ford, 2007) including biases in standardized testing and lack of parental partnership, advocacy and community influences. Still, teachers are often the gateway to the gifted program through their control over areas of recruitment, referral, and gifted nomination. Additionally, the deficit thinking, attention given to biases and stereotypical thinking, and low expectations from classroom teachers impact student's academic achievement and ultimately influence how successful students are in reaching their highest potential.

The Georgia Department of Education charges all teachers to consider the importance of students reaching their highest potential in the following

“Georgia educators are committed to the belief that education is a means by which each individual has the opportunity to reach his or her fullest potential... and in accordance with this philosophy, Georgia schools will

provide education programs that recognize and make provisions for the special needs of gifted and talented learners” (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

“Race, minority status, socioeconomic status, and other variables are not factors that predict what students can learn. More likely than not, they predict how schools will treat children” (Morris, 2002). Over the past decade, the state of Georgia has made efforts to address this underrepresentation of students from diverse backgrounds at the highest level of achievement, the state’s gifted program (Krisel & Cowan, 1997). In spite of these statewide efforts, the underrepresentation of these students from diverse backgrounds still persists (McBee, 2006). Elhoweris et al. (2005, p.25) point out that less than 2% of more than 4,000 articles written about gifted and talented students since 1924 were about students from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Therefore it is the purpose of this researcher to explore teacher beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program in a mid-sized suburban school district in Georgia. By exploring underrepresentation from the personal beliefs of teachers, this researcher will provide insight into the reasons for the persistence of the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs by offering an up-close view from the teachers’ perspective on this continuing issue.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

“It’s better to have imprecise answers to the right questions  
than precise answers to the wrong questions

(Donald Campbell, (1916/1996)

#### Introduction

In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the U.S. Census Bureau published figures illustrating the changing diversity of student enrollment in the United States. Over the past 30 years, the numbers of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from diverse backgrounds has nearly doubled. At the end of 2004 the percentage of students from diverse backgrounds had risen to 43% from the 1972 level of 22% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

Data analysis conducted on Georgia’s statewide student enrollment as well as the analysis of student enrollment in Suburban County School District, a Mid-sized Suburban School District in Georgia, show the presence of increasing diversity among these student populations. At the same time, specific data on the enrollment in the gifted program at the state and district level fail to parallel this increase in diversity; instead, the data indicate an underrepresentation of minority students in state and district level gifted programs.

McBee (2006), in his study on gifted referrals in the state of Georgia, obtained dataset records from the Georgia Department of Education showing Georgia’s 2004 public school student enrollment included 275,821 or 39% African-American students, 59,398 or 8% Hispanic students, and 333,569 or 47% Caucasian students. Conversely, McBee’s records show the 2004 Georgia elementary student enrollment in the gifted

program totaled 55,856 overall gifted students, with 8,695 or 15.56% African-American gifted students, 1,389 or 2.48% Hispanic gifted students, and 41,005 or 73.41% Caucasian gifted students.

At the school district level, underrepresentation of minority students also exists in the gifted program (Morris, 2002; Suburban County Schools, 2007). Data were obtained for the 2006-2007 school year in a small suburban school district in Georgia. The total enrollment included 2,229 or 36.5% African-American students, 488 or 8% Hispanic students, 3,289 or 53.8% Caucasian students, and 103 or 1.7% of students representing other ethnicities; while the total enrollment in the district's gifted program included 71 or 13.4% African American students, 10 or 1.9% Hispanic students, 435 or 81.9% Caucasian students, and 15 or 2.8% of students representing other ethnicities (Suburban County Schools, 2007). The above figures from the state and from a small suburban school district demonstrate the continued existence of underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs.

The underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a concern also voiced nationally and internationally through numerous research studies. In the process of determining the reasons for underrepresentation of these diverse students, research cites several causes or explanations. Standardized testing and traditional assessments often used for determining giftedness have been named as a cause of underrepresentation of minority students. Researchers also refer to the breakdown of parental partnership and the home and school connection to explain poor student achievement, thus making it reasonable to see this breakdown as having influence on the underrepresentation of diverse learners in gifted programs. Research also supports

teachers' biases, deficit thinking, and resulting low expectations for diverse learners as a reason for underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. In further examination of the effects teachers have on underrepresentation of minorities, it was discovered by this researcher that there is limited research exploring what teachers actually believe about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

A recent national study (de Wet, 2006) was conducted on teacher beliefs about the culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in the gifted program. This quantitative study, serving as a baseline study of teacher beliefs concerning diverse learners (de Wet, 2006), noted that little research has been done to determine teacher beliefs concerning culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students in the gifted program and their underrepresentation in this program. The quantitative study was conducted on a large, national sampling of teachers' beliefs and less than an 8% return on the survey was achieved by this study (de Wet, 2006). These facts lead this researcher to believe that in a qualitative research design teachers will more willingly provide an increased response rate due to the personal, face-to-face setting provided through the qualitative method of inquiry. This study will provide this researcher with an avenue to understand the underrepresentation of minority students from teachers' perspectives. Through their lived experiences, teachers form beliefs, attitudes, actions, and certainly perspectives that influence the instructional practices and goals in their classrooms (deWet, 2006). Giving teachers a "voice from the trenches" offers a different point of view in this continuing dialogue over the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. By encouraging open discourse and discussions from the teachers' point of view, an avenue for increasing the awareness of the continuing underrepresentation of

minority students in the gifted program will be offered. This growing awareness and dialog may also provide a means of increasing the representation of minority students in the gifted programs. Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to explore teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program in a mid-sized suburban school district in Georgia.

### Research Questions

The overarching question of this qualitative study is this: What are teachers' fundamental beliefs about the representation of minority students in the gifted program in a small suburban school district in Georgia? The following sub-questions will guide the research.

1. What do teachers believe are the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program?
2. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their ethnicities?
3. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their experiences?
4. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students shaped by their gifted training?

### Research Design

This study will use a qualitative method design. Extensive research has been conducted on the underrepresentation of students in the gifted program, but little is known regarding teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of diverse students. Qualitative research provides a means to explore and offer insight into this lesser known

area. Designing a qualitative approach allows this researcher to seek and discover participants' perspectives on their world. Additionally, it offers an interactive process between this researcher and the participants all the while gaining their in-depth thoughts and observable behaviors (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). A phenomenology research approach in this qualitative design is well-suited for this research study since this research approach takes individuals and explores their beliefs, feelings, and the meanings they have created through a rich and spontaneous setting of an unhurried, conversational inquiry or interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000; Meloy, 2002).

### Participants

Qualitative research offers a more flexible sampling technique when conducting a research study (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). In this study a purposive sampling procedure (Gay & Airasian, 2000) was used to select four schools from Suburban County School District. The sampling will purposively select two schools with a majority enrollment of minority students, Andrews School (pseudonym) and Brookside School (pseudonym), and two schools with a majority enrollment of non-minority students, Creekland School (pseudonym) and Dawson School (pseudonym). A stratified intensity sampling procedure (Gall et al., 1996, p.232) was used to select a total of eight classroom teachers from four purposively selected schools.

Gall et al (1996, p.232) refers to intensity sampling as a type of purposeful sampling where participants are selected that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely but not extremely. With a stratified intensity sampling, the selection of classroom teachers will provide an adequate representation of certain subgroups in the population of classroom teachers (Gall et al, 1996). These teachers offer informed beliefs

about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. The criterion for selection ensures representation of Caucasian and African-American teachers as well as teachers with varied training in gifted education for comparisons (Gay & Airasian, 2000).

### Instrumentation

Through the use of a qualitative method design, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (Gay & Airasian, 2000) with eight classroom teachers. Interviews offered this researcher a way to explore teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies whose subtle meanings could not be captured or developed in questionnaires or surveys (Meloy, 2002). These in-depth interviews were much like conversations with a purpose of describing the shared meaning of the concept of underrepresentation of diverse students from many different teachers' voices (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Prior to the interviews, this researcher followed Marshall and Rossman's (1999) recommended phenomenological research procedure of writing a full description of her own experience with the phenomenon of underrepresentation of diverse students in the gifted program. This procedure provided the researcher with a way of gaining clarity from her own preconceptions, with a means of separating her experiences from those of the respondents, and with a method of gaining control of one's own emotions and biases and prevent interviewer judgments.

Comprehensive interview questions were formulated by the researcher and were based on the overarching question as well as the four sub-questions. The initial draft of interview questions, formulated by researcher, is placed in Appendix A. Before beginning



the process of the actual qualitative study, this researcher conducted a pilot study using educators who were representative of the respondents in the study.

Prior to the beginning of the study, this researcher also conducted a pilot study by selecting four educators, representative of the eight participants to be interviewed, to serve in the pilot study. The pilot study offered this researcher useful information in preparation of the actual interviews. As members of the pilot study, the four educators were read the research questions and were reminded that the study was to be driven by these questions. An initial draft of the interview questions was presented at one time to all four educators in a focus group setting. They were asked to keep in mind the research questions as they listened to each interview question for clarity all the while focusing on how effective they were in addressing the research questions. As each interview question was read the pilot group began by discussing the question, its wording, and how effective it was in addressing the research questions. The group interacted together and actually bounced ideas and responses off each other during the discussion. Useful suggestions and comments were gathered as each interview question was read. The pilot study offered this researcher valuable information and feedback regarding the specific wording of interview questions. Interview questions considered unclear, confusing, or not focused on the research questions were modified to improve clarity and focus. Even though there was not huge changes in the wording of the interview questions there were several important insights that emerged from the pilot study. First, it was obvious that even slight wording can make a big difference in the clarity and focus of interview questions. Also, the focus group setting of the pilot study was a powerful setting when it came to the gathering of information and beliefs of teachers. It was very obvious to the researcher that the

discussions among the pilot group were information rich and filled with insight. The final draft of interview questions resulting from the pilot study is shown in Appendix B.

Following Glesne's (2006) guide to question formation, questions accessing past and present experiences will be used to begin the interview process. Depth-probing questions, with special emphasis placed on the creation of questions that the participants find relevant to the phenomenon being explored (Glesne, 2006), may well surface along the way giving this researcher an open-ended interview format to the study. During the interviews, this researcher will allow new questions to form and expand the inquiry.

In a qualitative design, this researcher became the research instrument. This researcher sharpened in on the skills need to observe behaviors (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), to learn the unique styles in language and expressions of the participants, to determine how to effectively present oneself to the participants, to gain trust, and finally, to establish rapport with each of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

#### Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in a comfortable and non-threatening location convenient for each participant. Interviews are planned for 45-60 minutes, and each session will be tape recorded. This will allow the researcher to capture the interview precisely and thoroughly. Guidelines for conducting the interview offered by Gay and Airasian (2000) and Glesne (2006) are synthesized and the following procedure will be used to ensure a most favorable interview setting and convey the attitude that the participants' views are valuable and useful:

1. Listen and look, being aware that feedback can be verbal and non-verbal.
2. Follow up on what is said and ask questions if needed for clarification.

3. Remember what is said – by you and the participant – so you can pick up on point and make connections or gaps.
4. Provide a quality experience for the participants conveying trust and honesty.
5. Control one's own emotions and biases, and do not be judgmental.
6. Keep track of time when interviewing and be punctual for each appointment.
7. Display reflexivity by recording in a journal one's own reflections, concerns, biases, and perspectives during the study.
8. If requested or desired, allow participants to review transcripts of tape recorded interview for accuracy and meaning at the end of the data collection period.

#### Data Analysis

The process of data analysis organized what this researcher has seen, heard, and read so that sense can be made of what has been learned (Glesne, 2006). Throughout the research study, this researcher will utilize the purpose statement and overarching questions as a guide during data collection and data analysis. However, in qualitative research, the sub-questions may evolve and expand as the researcher becomes immersed in the process.

In consideration of this research study's purpose and overarching question – to explore teachers' beliefs, about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program – tape-recorded interviews were this researcher's method of probing into the personal beliefs of teachers. All meaningful data including the interview tapes, transcripts and images will be analyzed multiple times to determine emerging thematic ideas and patterns that address the study's purpose.

This qualitative researcher used inductive analysis as a means of determining categories, themes, and patterns emerging from the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The gathered data materials were organized under categories of similar themes or ideas. Using the data analysis method described by Glesne (2006, p. 153) the data were organized into major code clumps reflecting key themes. As the analysis continues, the major codes will be broken down into specific sub-codes. The major code clumps and sub-codes were combined and placed into a meaningful sequence (Glesne, 2006) as ongoing support of the study's purpose.

As part of the continuing data analysis, the tape-recorded interviews were professionally transcribed. The completed transcript from each interview was coded. The coding process included matching short phrases or an abbreviation of major code and sub-codes with each line or group of lines in the transcribed text.

#### Reporting the Data

Visual representations of gathered data assist in making meaning of the data, exploring gaps in data, and acknowledge areas where more data are needed (Glesne, 2006). Therefore, the completed transcripts from each interview were color-coded to identify keywords, phrases, and statements corresponding to the interviewer's questions. Each interview question, in turn, corresponds to specific research question.

#### Summary

The underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a concern voiced in numerous research studies. In the process of determining the reasons for underrepresentation of these diverse students, research cites several causes or explanations. Standardized testing and traditional assessments often used for determining

giftedness have been named as a cause of underrepresentation of minority students, the breakdown of parental partnership and the home and school connection is often used to explain poor student achievement and the often resulting underrepresentation of diverse learners in gifted programs, and finally, research supports teachers' biases, deficit thinking, and resulting low expectations of minority students as a reason for their underrepresentation in the gifted program. In further examination of the effects teachers have on underrepresentation of minorities, it was discovered by this researcher that there is limited research exploring what teachers actually believe about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

This study used a qualitative method design. Qualitative research provides a means to explore and offer insight into this lesser known area. Designing a qualitative approach allows this researcher to seek and discover participants' perspectives on their world. Additionally, it offers an interactive process between this researcher and the participants all the while gaining their in-depth thoughts and observable behaviors.

In this study a purposive sampling procedure was used to select four schools from the Suburban County School District. The sampling purposively selected two schools with a majority enrollment of minority students and two schools with a majority enrollment of non-minority students. A stratified intensity sampling procedure was used to select a total of 8 classroom teachers from four purposively selected schools.

Through the use of a qualitative method design, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with eight classroom teachers. Interviews offered this researcher a way to explore teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies whose subtle meanings could not be captured or developed in questionnaires or surveys. These in-depth interviews

were much like conversations with a purpose of describing the shared meaning of the concept of underrepresentation of diverse students from many different teachers' voices. Comprehensive interview questions were formulated by the researcher and are based on the overarching question as well as the four sub-questions.

Interviews were conducted in a comfortable and non-threatening location convenient for each participant. Interviews lasted for 45-60 minutes and each session was tape recorded. This allowed the researcher to capture the interview precisely and thoroughly.

The process of data analysis organized what this researcher has seen, heard, and read so that it could be synthesized. Throughout the research study, this researcher utilized the purpose statement and overarching questions as a guide during data collection and data analysis. As part of the continuing data analysis, the tape-recorded interviews were professionally transcribed. The completed transcript from each interview was coded. The coding process includes matching short phrases or an abbreviation of major code and sub-codes with each line or group of lines in the transcribed text.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

“Listening is not merely not talking,  
though even that is beyond most of our powers;  
it means taking a vigorous, human interest  
in what is being told us”

(Alice Duer Miller, (1874/1942)

#### Introduction

The underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a concern voiced in numerous research studies and in data obtained at the state and district level. McBee (2006), in his study on gifted referrals in the state of Georgia, shows Georgia’s 2004 public school student enrollment included 335,219 or 47% minority students (African-American and Hispanic students), and 333,569 or 47% Caucasian students, and an elementary student enrollment in the gifted program totaled 55,856 overall gifted students, with approximately 18% minority gifted students, and approximately 72% Caucasian gifted students.

At the school district level, underrepresentation of minority students also exists in the gifted program (Morris, 2002; Suburban County Schools, 2007). Data were obtained for the 2006-2007 school year in a mid-sized suburban school district in Georgia. The total enrollment included approximately 44% minority students and 53.8% Caucasian students; while the total enrollment in the district’s gifted program included approximately 15% minority students and 82% Caucasian students (Suburban County Schools, 2007). The above figures from the state and from a mid-sized suburban school

district demonstrate the continued existence of underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs.

In the process of determining the reasons for underrepresentation of these diverse students, research cites several causes or explanations. These include standardized testing and traditional assessments that are often used initially for determining giftedness. Also, the breakdown of minority parental partnership between the home and school is frequently an explanation given for poor minority student achievement and academic performance which may, in turn, influence the recognition of minority students for the gifted program. Teachers' biases, deficit thinking, and resulting low expectations for diverse learners may also result in the lack of recognition of giftedness in the diverse learner and lead to the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. In further examination of the effects teachers have on underrepresentation of minorities, it was discovered by this researcher that there is limited research exploring what classroom teachers actually believe about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

As a means of exploring the beliefs of teachers concerning the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, this researcher conducted a study using a qualitative method design. This design offered an interactive process between this researcher and the participants while gaining their in-depth thoughts and observable behaviors (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (Gay & Airasian, 2000) with eight selected classroom teachers representing African-American and Caucasian teachers, as well as teachers possessing a gifted-endorsement and teachers who had not pursued a gifted-endorsement.



Prior to the study, the researcher conducted a pilot study. As suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (1998), the pilot study allowed this researcher to obtain feedback from the pilot participants on specific wording of interview questions that may be unclear or confusing to interview participants. Before beginning of the study, this researcher selected four educators, representative of the eight participants to be interviewed, to serve in a pilot study. As members of the pilot study, the four educators were read the research questions and were reminded that the study was to be driven by these questions. As each interview question was read the pilot group discussed the question, its wording, and how effective it was in addressing the research questions. Useful suggestions and comments were gathered, and valuable information and feedback regarding the specific wording of interview questions was provided. The interview questions were modified to improve clarity and focus. An initial draft of interview questions, prior to the pilot study, is shown in Appendix A, and the final draft of interview questions, created after the pilot study, is shown in Appendix B.

### Research Questions

The overarching question of this qualitative study is this: What are teachers' fundamental beliefs about the representation of minority students in the gifted program in a small suburban school district in Georgia? The following sub-questions will guide the research.

1. What do teachers believe are the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program?
2. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their ethnicities?

3. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their experiences?
4. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students shaped by their gifted training?

### Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative method design. Qualitative research provided a means to explore and offer insight into this lesser known area of teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Designing a qualitative approach allowed this researcher to offer a rich and spontaneous setting of an unhurried, conversational inquiry or interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Gay & Airasian, 2000; Meloy, 2002).

A stratified intensity sampling procedure (Gall et al., 1996, p.232) was used to select a total of eight classroom teachers as respondents from four purposively selected schools. Of the eight respondents, three respondents were from the two schools with a majority enrollment of minority students, and five respondents were from the two schools with a majority enrollment of non-minority students. Information on the purposively selected schools is shown on Table 2.

Prior to the beginning of the study, this researcher selected four educators, representative of the eight participants to be interviewed, to serve in a pilot study. The pilot study offered this researcher useful information in preparation of the actual interviews. As members of the pilot study, the four educators were read the research questions and were reminded that the study was to be driven by these questions. Useful suggestions and comments were gathered as each interview question was read.

Table 2

*Descriptions of the Four Selected Schools*

Pseudonym	Demographic	Gifted Identification	Percent of gifted students
Andrews School	≥ 70% minority	Georgia's regulations	≤ 10%
Brookside School	≥ 70% minority	Georgia's regulations	≤ 10%
Creeklane School	≥ 60% Caucasian	Georgia's regulations	≤ 20%
Dawson School	≥ 60% Caucasian	Georgia's regulations	≤ 20%

The pilot study offered this researcher valuable information and feedback regarding the specific wording of interview questions. Interview questions considered unclear, confusing, or not focused on the research questions were modified to improve clarity and focus. It was very obvious to the researcher that the discussions among the pilot group were information rich and filled with insight. The final draft of interview questions that resulted from the pilot study is shown in Appendix B.

Following the pilot study, this researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with eight classroom teachers through the use of a qualitative method design. The in-depth interviews offered this researcher a way to explore teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies in comfortable settings more like conversations. Since previous research done on the subject of teachers' beliefs (de Wet, 2006) was conducted as a quantitative study with less than an 8% return on the survey, this researcher believed that by using a qualitative research design, teachers would willingly provide a greater response rate due to the personal, face-to-face setting. This researcher found, however, that it was much

more difficult to obtain respondents than expected, especially respondents from the two schools with a majority population of minority students.

After purposively selecting classroom teachers from the four schools, the researcher contacted all teachers via email requesting their participation. After a second failed attempt to obtain a response from the teachers in the two minority schools, this researcher visited a staff meeting at both schools briefly explaining the study and the rights of participants. Respondents were finally found after several more contacts.

#### Demographic Profile of the Respondents

In this study a purposive sampling procedure (Gay & Airasian, 2000) was used to select four schools from the Suburban County School District, two schools with a majority enrollment of minority students and two schools with a majority enrollment of non-minority students. The criteria for selection of respondents included Caucasian and African-American teachers in numbers that were representative of the elementary staff of the school district. This included three African-American teachers and five Caucasian teachers. All respondents were female. The criterion for selection ensures representation of Caucasian and African-American teachers as well as teachers with varied training in gifted education for comparisons. As a way of presenting the study's findings, this researcher provides descriptions of the respondents organized by pseudonyms as shown in Table 3.

#### Findings

As a means of reporting the data, this researcher presented the findings from the research by responding to the individual research questions driving the study, beginning with the over-arching research question.

Table 3

*Descriptions of the Eight Respondents*

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	School's Demographic	Gifted Training
Anna	African-American	Majority Caucasian	Yes
Barbara	Caucasian	Majority Caucasian	Yes
Carol	African-American	Majority Minority	No
Donna	Caucasian	Majority Minority	No
Emily	Caucasian	Majority Caucasian	Yes
Felicia	Caucasian	Majority Caucasian	No
Gwen	Caucasian	Majority Minority	No
Helen	African-American	Majority Caucasian	Yes

*What are teachers' fundamental beliefs about the representation of minority students in the gifted program in a small suburban school district in Georgia?* The fundamental beliefs of the eight classroom teachers (Anna, Barbara, Carol, Donna, Emily, Felicia, Gwen, and Helen) concerning the representation of minority students in the gifted program were varied. Donna, a teacher in at Andrews School – a majority minority school – found it hard to express her thoughts about minority students in the gifted program and saw it as an issue she could not pinpoint. Barbara, a teacher at Creekland School – a majority Caucasian school – felt the concern of minority representation was “totally out of our hands,” while Emily, a teacher at Dawson School – a majority Caucasian school – noted the concern for her was over the large class sizes

and how students, particularly minority students, can get “lost” in the classroom. Anna, a teacher at Creekland School, spoke sadly that, prior to receiving gifted training, she may have contributed to the underrepresentation of minority students by not knowing there were different “expressions” of giftedness among students. As Barbara expressed, “Everyone has their own ideas of gifted and what it means.”

While some teachers had thoughts that were uniquely their own, most teachers voiced beliefs with many similarities and parallels concerning the representation of minority students in the gifted program. All teachers believed that test scores had a direct influence over the representation of all students in the gifted program. Many, including Anna, Barbara, and Felicia from Creekland, and Helen from Dawson, Gwen from Andrews, and Carol from Brookside, went further to say that different testing instruments should be utilized to show what is not included on a standardized test. Alternate assessments – such as Barbara’s idea of portfolios highlighting a student’s area of talent, or Anna’s suggestions of alternate assessments including teacher observations, checklists, parent input, and anecdotal records, as well as ideas from Helen and Felicia to use multiple testing instruments that capture the potential of students with English as their second language – should be considered when addressing the underrepresentation of minority students. Anna, Barbara, Carol, and Felicia, who represented half of the participants, further expressed a belief that formal testing for gifted should not begin until 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. According to these teachers, the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade year was the year giftedness stood out, that students became more inquisitive, their verbal skills strengthened, and the effects of what Felicia called “early advantage” of multiple experiences and resources was equaled out by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. “Students become more inquisitive, more verbal, and

overall stronger students as they enter the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and higher,” mentioned Gwen. And an even more telling statement from Anna declared “Earlier grades should be a time when all students are treated as gifted and receive enrichment and expanded curriculum.”

A majority of the teachers, Anna, Barbara, Carol, Felicia, Gwen, and Helen, described their beliefs about the importance of taking a holistic approach when considering the representation of students in the gifted program. With myriad areas of giftedness, they described experiences where they were looking for “out of the box” thinkers, students with higher-level curiosity or inquisitiveness even in just one area of interest. The creative child, the artist, the musician, and the student who seemed to “thirst” for learning in areas beyond reading and math were described by the participants. Two respondents, Anna and Helen, told of seeing giftedness in students who were not necessarily the rule-followers.

Helen explained, “These students are not always the perfect or straght ‘A’ student; instead they are the ones who often end up doing just the opposite of what is expected of them. They are the behavior problems in the classroom because they might already know what’s going on and being taught.”

According to Helen, even the defiant child may be the very gifted student that schools will overlook. “That defiance and masking of being bright,” Helen has found, “emphasizes giftedness even more,”

During her interview, Gwen quietly told a story of a young minority student she taught many years ago. She described how she had “stumbled on the child” who seemed to be gifted. “I wasn’t looking for [a gifted student] to be in my classroom. I was not actively seeking gifted students in my class; instead I was only focused on serving the

lower achieving students first. You know we need to change our focus on children with the potential for giftedness versus only looking at below level students who need to be brought up [to grade level],” she said.

*What do teachers believe are the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program?* A shared belief among the teachers interviewed is that there are multiple reasons for the underrepresentation of the diverse learner. Many teachers described barriers that exist and have a direct affect on the representation of minority students in the gifted program. Most teachers interviewed from the Andrews School and Brookside School felt that one reason for underrepresentation of minority students was the overwhelming paperwork involved in gifted referrals. According to these teachers, the paperwork overload prevented teachers from referring students, especially when it came to referring students who did not receive automatic referral from test scores. (Automatic referrals are referrals of students into the gifted program that occur automatically when a student scores in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher on a standardized test.) Every teacher interviewed, no matter which school they taught in, felt that dependence on test scores for gifted placement was an important reason for the underrepresentation of minority students.

Emily, Gwen, Carol, Anna, and Helen told of situations where a minority student simply did not do well on one particular test on one particular day, and even though the student demonstrated higher-level thinking and excellent academic achievement, the test scores prevented the teacher from furthering a gifted referral. Emily and Gwen told very similar stories of a student missing the qualifying test score by one point and therefore were not eligible for gifted referral. Emily explained that an illness and allergy prevented



several students from doing well on standardized tests, especially since they are administered during high pollen seasons. Carol described her experience by telling, “There was a student I taught who was particularly upset on test day because of a particular occurrence at home. Then, when the test scores arrived this student, who was a minority student, demonstrated unexpectedly low test results. Even though they were nowhere near her true abilities she was not considered for the gifted program.”

Teachers also discussed student whose behaviors represented a reason for underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Three teachers, Carol, Helen, and Barbara, spoke extensively of situations where, as Carol explained, “the behavior clouded the referral process” for the minority student. Carol again told a story of a minority student she once taught who suddenly refused to do homework. “This child was creating their own barrier to the gifted program by intentionally letting her grades drop,” Carol said, “and instead of the school figuring out what was going with her she was pulled out of the gifted program.”

Helen told a similar story of a student who intentionally masked her giftedness by sabotaging her test scores. “She actually tried to score poorly on the [abilities and achievement] tests we give at school,” said Helen. “In an amazing turn of events, we were able to quietly administer a test to her without her knowing what the test was for. Her scores came back in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile! Imagine that up until then she had successfully been able to hide her true academic abilities from us and others.”

Barbara described a situation where a child’s behavior in class prevented her from placement in the gifted program. Barbara quietly explained, “Another teacher chose not to support the automatic referral of a minority student for gifted because the teacher felt

the minority student was a behavior problem.” According to Barbara, this fellow teacher assumed the student would not do as well as others in the gifted program because of her behavior, so the student did not get referred for the gifted program. Carol expressed a concern that if a child is disruptive in the regular classroom then that behavior would also be present in the gifted class.

Lack of minority parent advocacy and failure by schools to create partnerships with parents and the community were mentioned consistently by teachers from all four schools as a reason for the underrepresentation of minority students. Teachers including Anna, Barbara, and Felicia, from the schools with a majority Caucasian student population, felt that non-minority parents were active in their advocacy and often played a significant role in their child’s gifted placement. They described them as parents who spoke out for their child, who “understood the inner workings of the school,” who were “in the know about testing,” and who knew how to prepare their children for success in testing situations. These same teachers told of experiences where non-minority parents offered their children vast experiences, extensive travel opportunities, worked with them at home, had books in the home, read to their children at an early age, and often pushed their child to the excess. “It all starts at home and totally involves the parents,” reported Felicia.

Teachers in both school environments and from all schools selected voiced concerns about the lack of advocacy by minority parents as a reason for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Teachers from schools with a majority Caucasian student population felt that minority parents were not demanding enough to ensure their child’s placement in the gifted program. Barbara

believed it was possible that minority parents did not associate positive experiences with school and so were hesitant to express concerns to the school.

Several teachers from the schools with a large minority student population expressed beliefs that the school could do more to create partnerships with minority parents and the community when it came to explaining the gifted program. “Sometimes the parents do not realize the significance of the gifted program, and the benefits it offers to children. They are happy with the A’s their child makes and do not push their child to achieve higher,” Gwen reported. “If they were told more about the program, I think it would make a difference.”

When it came to creating partnership, Anna, Barbara, Felicia, Gwen, Helen, and Carol suggested several different ways that schools and the district might implement informational sessions about the gifted program as a way to increase the representation of minority students in the gifted program. Ideas such as creating a Gifted Information Table at Open House came from Anna, public announcements was suggested by Felicia, talking with community members, especially in the minority community, about gifted education and explaining specifics to the general public about the gifted program was an idea from Carol. Explain what is available, how referrals are made, and when are the gifted testing windows was proposed by Barbara and Gwen. “More education is needed by all involved about our gifted program,” suggested Helen, “and this includes teachers, parents, and the community.”

At the end of their interview, Donna, Gwen, Helen and Anna voiced similar feeling about the final reason for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. It lies with the teachers themselves. Donna explained, “In these days of

high-stakes testing many teachers can't afford to look for giftedness in students; instead our focus is on helping the lower performing students." Gwen proposed, "There is emphasis on training teachers to understand the needs of special education, but there are no clear directives on how to recognize giftedness in students." "Teachers," she said, "just get bogged down with preparing for testing and there's not much weight placed on gifted referrals,"

Helen believes that the biggest barrier or reason for underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is the mindset of teachers, students, and parents. "Something major needs to happen in the minds of people and their thinking," she explained, "Teachers need to look at their own behaviors and see what they communicate to minority students through body language, expectations, and ways they teach. By thinking that minority kids are not going to do as well as others is a justification for not putting the effort into teaching. You'll bring about change over a period of time when everyone who is responsible for teaching truly believes that everyone is the same in terms of their ability to learn."

Anna summed up her interview by saying, "It comes down to the philosophy of whether or not you really think that having minority students in a gifted program is a goal you are after. If inclusiveness is one of your goals then consider alternatives and strategies, and plans in that program. It's whether or not you truly want to include minority students in your [gifted] program. If you do, then what you want your gifted program to look like."

*How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their ethnicities?* Two ethnicities, African-American and

Caucasian, were represented by the respondents in this research study. There were three areas where the beliefs of the African-American teachers – Carol, Anna, and Helen – and the Caucasian teachers – Barbara, Felicia, Donna, Gwen, and Emily – were different concerning the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students. All African-American teachers and one Caucasian teacher, Felicia, spoke of their beliefs in the importance of a holistic approach to determining giftedness in students. The other teachers spoke of testing, guidelines, and demonstrations of something they couldn't pinpoint like a spark or higher-level thinking.

All African-American teachers described a similar belief that some minority children do sabotage their placement in gifted or make an effort to prevent inclusion in the gifted program. Anna and Helen mentioned that they look closely at students who are behavior problems or are defiant. They can see where this behavior could be an indicator of giftedness in a minority student. Felicia stated that gifted children can be underachievers; however, the majority of Caucasian teachers described indicators for giftedness as seeing students who would dig deeper, show a “thirst for learning,” and absorb themselves in interests with an unwillingness to settle for a single answer.

An area of differing beliefs between the two represented ethnicities was the role schools play in the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. All African-American teachers stated their beliefs in an improved community and parent partnership with the school. Information about the gifted program should be shared with all involved in a minority child's education. Many in the minority community need to be informed about the gifted program and what it offers students as a way to address the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Gwen shared, “The

schools should increase after school programming to include a variety of experiences such as expanded enrichment clubs and other additional resources through after school programs for low achieving students.”

*How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their experiences?* Though all respondents in this research study were female and classroom teachers, experiences were varied among the respondents in this researcher's study. Anna and Carol had been teaching fewer than ten years, while Barbara, Donna, Emily, Felicia, Gwen, and Helen had taught for fifteen or more years. All of the teachers except Anna had had past experiences teaching in a school where the majority of the students were African-American.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents felt that their teaching experiences and current experiences have shaped their beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Most teachers believe that more years of experience offers an educator the benefits from being able to compare students. Felicia and Donna both expressed the belief that when you have more years of experience and have taught in more than one grade level, you are able to see the differences in students. “I have taught students who are smart, but over the years it has become more apparent to me that being smart and being gifted are very different,” admitted Gwen.

Helen told of her early years in the classroom and how she depended on her personal experiences as a student. These experiences provided her with knowledge in recognizing giftedness in students since she, herself, had been a gifted student. At times Carol felt beleaguered when she was new inexperienced teacher. “You are so overwhelmed with learning how to be a teacher that you put things like looking for

giftedness in students on the back burner. There is really no time for anything; just [achieving] good test scores as a new teacher.”

Donna acknowledged, “Years of experience meant nothing when it came to recognizing giftedness in all students. If you don’t know what you are looking for, how would you know if you saw it?” She did, however, recall one student she had taught who did exhibit exceptional artistic ability and was probably considered gifted.

Teachers did feel that experience had shown them that grade level did shape their beliefs about giftedness in minority students. Six of the eight felt that determining giftedness in the early years, kindergarten through second, only mirrored the early experiences of students. Teachers spoke of minority students who may not have had the benefits of a home environment where reading and education was valued or families that could provide extensive experiences such as traveling. These students would not necessarily perform at grade level or communicate well when they first began school. “In the upper grades things are equalized,” responded Emily. “Giftedness is showing in students who are truly gifted learners.” Anna also wondered, “Why can’t we treat all kindergarten through second graders as gifted? Then by third grade we can get serious about determining who is really gifted and everyone will have had the same experiences and enrichment.”

*Are teachers’ beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students shaped by their gifted training?* In this researcher’s study Anna, Barbara, Emily, and Helen possess a gifted endorsement. The teachers who did not possess gifted endorsement felt that knowledge about gifted education is the key to increasing the representation of minority students in the gifted program. Because they did not know the characteristics of

giftedness, many sensed that they had overlooked minority students who were gifted. However, all believed that by increasing their knowledge in the area of gifted education, they could begin to “bring out giftedness,” encourage creativity, and expand and broaden the challenges that they offer to minority students.

Teachers possessing gifted endorsements all spoke of understanding how to expand the criteria for gifted placement. Anna uses an internal checklist and looks for the varied characteristics and qualities of the gifted student. She and Helen told of reading research during their gifted endorsement classes which helped them become better teachers. “When I got my gifted endorsement,” Anna declared, “my eyes were opened to multiple intelligences and indicators of giftedness present in all students.”

#### Summary

Exploring teachers’ beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program provided this researcher with an avenue to understand the underrepresentation of minority students from teachers’ perspectives, their beliefs, their attitudes, and experiences working with students. Giving teachers this voice offered a unique point of view in the continuing dialogue over the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

Based on the factual reporting of data, the fundamental beliefs of teachers about the representation of minority students in the gifted program are as varied as the individuals interviewed in this study. From beliefs that the underrepresentation of minority students was “totally out of their hands” to the belief that “everyone has their own ideas about gifted,” teachers freely offered their own unique feelings and attitudes.



Most teachers voiced the belief that test scores had a direct influence on the representation of minority students in the gifted program, and provided suggestions on how a school might go about capturing the gifted potential of all students. This holistic approach to determining giftedness in students echoed the belief that a child can be gifted in many ways, and when teachers understand this it can influence the representation of students in the gifted program. Even a defiant student may be the very gifted student that schools overlook.

When asked the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, many of the teachers expressed beliefs focused on the barriers to the gifted program faced by minority students. Paperwork, concerns over high-stakes testing, and student behavior, including examples of minority students sabotaging gifted placement, were all seen as barriers that prevent teachers from referring minority students who often do not automatically qualify for the gifted program. Lack of parent advocacy and failure by schools to create partnerships with minority parents and community members also contribute to the reasons for underrepresentation of minority students. As a final statement in their interviews, three teachers felt that the problem often lies within the teachers themselves – their lack of training in gifted education, their mindset of thinking minority students would not do well in gifted programs, and basic philosophical beliefs about desiring a truly inclusive gifted program

Data showed that teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program are also shaped by their ethnicity, their experiences, and their possession of a gifted endorsement. Beliefs of the African-American respondents in a holistic approach to determining giftedness, in the existence of minority students

sabotaging their placement, and in the need to involve a community partnership in understanding giftedness differed from the beliefs of the majority of Caucasian respondents who spoke of automatic referrals, the encouragement of higher-level thinking, and the varied expression of giftedness in all students.

Teachers believed that experience plays a part in shaping beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Experience, many said, offers teachers the benefit of being able to compare students thus giving them a keener ability to differentiate between being a smart student and being a gifted student. Teachers with fewer years experience were overwhelmed with the demands of teaching and said that looking for giftedness in students took a back burner to learning to teach and testing. Even experience in particular grade levels shape teacher beliefs. The majority of teachers saw that early grades typically mirror the early experiences and advantages given to students, but by upper grades, things began to equalized, and teachers could get serious about determining who is really gifted.

Finally, teachers possessing a gifted endorsement said they found it easier to expand their individual searches for indicators of giftedness in students. Teachers who did not possess a gifted endorsement felt they had overlooked minority students who were gifted simply because they did not know the characteristics of giftedness in students. However, all teachers believed that by increasing their knowledge in gifted education through endorsements, information sessions, and even overviews of gifted characteristics, they could begin to “bring out giftedness in students” by encourage creativity, and expanding and broadening the challenges that they offer to minority students and all students they teach.

## CHAPTER 5

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

“We know the truth, not only by the reason,  
but also by the heart” (Blaise Pascal, (1623/1662).

## Summary

On January 8, 2002, a historic piece of educational legislation, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, was signed into law by President George W. Bush (U. S. Department of Education, 2001). This event brought about change to public school education in America by increasing the attention given to the representation of diverse populations of its students. Over the past 30 years, the numbers of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from diverse backgrounds has nearly doubled (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

The state of Georgia experienced a similar change in the landscape of public school education. Based on the enrollment count in October 2005, minority students were now in the majority in Georgia’s public schools, bringing an increase in the attention given to the student academic achievement gap and rates of academic improvement among minority students (Johnson, 2006). Even though students from diverse backgrounds are now in the majority, the total number of students from diverse backgrounds enrolled in the gifted program is not representative of the diversity in the state’s current student enrollment.

The underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a concern voiced in many research studies and shown through data at the state and district level. In the process of determining the reasons for underrepresentation of these diverse students,

research cites several causes or explanations. These include the use of standardized testing and traditional assessments for determining giftedness, the breakdown of minority parental partnership between the home and school which is blamed for causing poor academic achievement of minority students, and teachers' biases, deficit thinking, and low expectations resulting in failure to recognize giftedness in the diverse learner. In further examination of the effects teachers have on underrepresentation of minorities, it was discovered by this researcher that there is limited research exploring what classroom teachers actually believe about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

As a means of exploring the beliefs of teachers concerning the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, this researcher conducted a study using a qualitative method design. This design offered an interactive process between this researcher and the participants while gaining the in-depth thoughts and observable behaviors (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) of each participant. By encouraging open discourse and discussions from the teachers' point of view, an avenue for increasing the awareness of the continuing underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program was offered. This growing awareness and dialog may also provide a means of increasing the representation of minority students in the gifted programs. Therefore, it was the purpose of this study to explore teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program in a mid-sized suburban school district in Georgia.

The overarching question of this qualitative study was: What are teachers' fundamental beliefs about the representation of minority students in the gifted program in

a small suburban school district in Georgia? The following sub-questions guided the research.

1. What do teachers believe are the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program?
2. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their ethnicities?
3. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their experiences?
4. How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students shaped by their gifted training?

This researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected classroom teachers representing African-American and Caucasian teachers, as well as teachers possessing a gifted-endorsement and teachers who had not pursued a gifted-endorsement. Following the interviews, the tapes were transcribed, and the completed transcripts from each interview were color coded to identify keywords, phrases, and statements corresponding to the interviewer's questions. Each interview question corresponds to specific research questions. Responses to each interview question were organized and classified according to the corresponding research question.

Based on factual reporting of data, the fundamental beliefs of teachers about the representation of minority students in the gifted program are as varied as the individuals interviewed. Eight classroom teachers voiced opinions concerning the representation of minority students in the gifted program through in-depth interviews conducted by this researcher. From a belief that the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted

program was “totally out of our hands” to the belief that “everyone has their own ideas about gifted,” teachers freely offered their own unique feelings and attitudes about the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students. It was also apparent from the factual data gathered that teachers’ ethnicity, years of teaching experience and grade level experience, as well as whether they possessed a gifted endorsement or not did influenced their fundamental beliefs about the representation of minority students in the gifted program.

#### Analysis of Research Findings

Through interviews conducted in this research study, most teachers voiced the belief that test scores had a direct influence on the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, and they provided suggestions for capturing the gifted potential of all students through a holistic approach to determining giftedness. Paperwork, concerns over high-stakes testing, and student behavior, including examples of minority students sabotaging gifted placement, were all seen as barriers that prevent teachers from referring minority students who often do not automatically qualify for the gifted program. Lack of parent advocacy, failure by schools to create partnerships with minority parents and community members, and problems lying within the teachers themselves such as lack of training in gifted education, their mindset about minority students’ achievement, and basic philosophical beliefs also contribute to the reasons for underrepresentation of minority students.

Data shows that teachers’ beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program are also shaped by their ethnicity, their experiences, and their possession of a gifted endorsement. Beliefs of the African-American respondents in

a holistic approach to determining giftedness, in the existence of minority students sabotaging their placement, and in the need to involve a community partnership in understanding giftedness differed from the beliefs of the majority of Caucasian respondents who spoke of automatic referrals, the encouragement of higher-level thinking, and the varied expression of giftedness in all students.

Most teachers felt that experience played a part in shaping beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Experience, many said, offered teachers the benefit of being able to compare students thus giving them a keener ability to differentiate between being a smart student and being a gifted student. Teachers with fewer years experience were overwhelmed with the demands of teaching and said that looking for giftedness in students took a back burner to learning to teach and testing. Even experience in particular grade levels shape teacher beliefs. The majority of teachers saw that early grades typically mirror the early experiences and advantages given to students, but by upper grades, things began to equalized, and teachers could get serious about determining who is really gifted.

Finally, teachers possessing a gifted endorsement said they found it easier to expand their individual searches for indicators of giftedness in students, while teachers who did not possess a gifted endorsement felt they had overlooked minority students who were gifted simply because they did not know the characteristics of giftedness in students. All teachers believed that by increasing their knowledge in gifted education through endorsements, information sessions, and even overviews of gifted characteristics, they could begin to “bring out giftedness in students” by encourage creativity, and

expanding and broadening the challenges that they offer to minority students and all students they teach.

### Discussion of Research Findings

As a means of reporting the data, this researcher presented the findings from the research by responding to the individual research questions driving the study, beginning with the over-arching research question.

*What are teachers' fundamental beliefs about the representation of minority students in the gifted program in a small suburban school district in Georgia?* A variety of fundamental beliefs were expressed by the eight classroom teachers interviewed about the representation of minority students in the gifted program with one teacher capturing the overall feeling by stating, "Everyone has their own ideas of gifted and what it means."

This statement reflects what this researcher found in the research and literature surrounding the topic of giftedness and recognizing giftedness in students. Borland (1997) describes the term gifted as something we have invented in our writing and talking, while Renzulli (2002) suggests that the varied definitions of giftedness can range from the restrictive and tidy to the expanded, multifaceted approaches to giftedness. One teacher's comment of finding it hard to express her thoughts about minority students in the gifted program and seeing it as an issue she could not pinpoint was reminiscent of Cramond's (2004, p.15) essay explaining, "How can we expect to solve [a problem], when the field can't even agree on a definition of giftedness!"

According to Sternberg (2007), whether a person is judged gifted should not depend on a definition but on the values of the culture, cultural origins, and contexts. The



beliefs of one teacher supports this statement when she began telling of “stumbling on a child” that seemed to be gifted in a classroom of mostly minority students. “I wasn’t looking for it [a gifted student] to be in my classroom. I was not actively seeking gifted students in my class.” Maybe a proliferation of definitions will allow, as Cramond (2004) says, for representation of various viewpoints, consideration of diverse abilities, and the expansion of the field.

In direct contrast to the varied beliefs of giftedness and what it means, all teachers believed that test scores had a direct influence over the representation of students in the gifted program. Similar to the statements made by teachers, researchers (Brown et al, 2005) state that the identification of gifted and talented students has been inextricably linked to intelligence tests. Tests such as the *Stanford-Binet Intellectual Scale* and the *Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale*, reflect a cultural conception of competence designed to predict school performance and a student’s current level of intellectual capacity for achievement in reading, language, and math (Lyman, 1998; Sternberg, 2007).

Many teachers went further to say that different testing instruments should be utilized with students to show what is not included on a standardized test and use a more holistic approach when considering the representation of students in the gifted program. This reflects a climate described by Baldwin (2002), Bouchard (2004), Maker (1996), Naglieri and Ford (2003), Pierce et al (2007), Renzulli (2002), Sarouphim (2004), Sternberg (2007), VanTassel-Baska et al (2002) and VanTassel-Baska et al (2007) for redefining intelligence with alternatives to traditional IQ tests. Suggestions from teachers such as using portfolios, teacher observations, checklists, parent input, and anecdotal records highlighting a student’s area of talent match those same ideas from VanTassel-

Baska et al (2007) and Renzulli's (2002, p. 65) proposal of looking at giftedness through a "wide angle lens." Even the concerns over needing multiple testing instruments that capture the potential of students with English as their second language when addressing the representation of minority students follow the thoughts of Winebrenner (2001) who suggests non-verbal tests such as *Naglieri Non-Verbal Abilities Tests* and other alternate assessments may address the educational ignoring of ethnically and culturally diverse students in our gifted programs "You know we need to change our focus on all children with the potential for giftedness versus only looking at the below level students who need to be brought up [to grade level]," expressed one teacher in her beliefs about minority representation in the gifted programs.

With myriad areas of giftedness, teachers described experiences where they were looking at "out of the box" thinkers, higher-level curiosity in students, the creative child, the artist, the musician, and the student who seemed to "thirst" for learning in areas beyond reading and math. Mindful of the statement from Gardner and Moran (2006) that a Multiple Intelligences approach to intelligence demands a change of mind in researchers and educators, this researcher found a change in mind in the majority of teachers. Many of the teachers interviewed focused on ways to address the representation of minority students in gifted programs by considering several of the intelligences beyond standardized testing. Even though teachers did not mention Gardner's (1983) eight intelligences by name, it was clear they saw expressions of giftedness in many areas such as the arts and music in addition to the typical areas of language arts and mathematical realms of school curriculum.

*What do teachers believe are the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program?* A shared belief among the teachers interviewed is that there are multiple reasons for the underrepresentation of the diverse learner. Many teachers described barriers that exist and have a direct affect on the representation of minority students in the gifted program. Just as Kunkel's (2007) teachers became frustrated with the limitations of standardized tests, the teachers interviewed saw students who were smart in many different ways but were not seeing success in standardized testing because of having a bad day on testing day or missing the cut off score by one point. Their definitions seemed to more closely match those of Bouchard (2004) who saw gifted in a broader way in terms of potential areas such as innovation, creativity, leadership or visual and performing arts, or Naglieri and Ford (2005) who reported the notion of identifying students demonstrating high achievement and were "potentially gifted."

Lack of minority parent advocacy and failure by schools to create partnerships with minority parents and communities were mentioned consistently by teachers from all four schools as a reason for the underrepresentation of minority students. From parental studies, Ablard (1996) recognized that parents are one of the most supportive advocacy groups and promising resources available to assist in making improvements in gifted programs. Teachers from schools with a majority Caucasian student population felt that non-minority parents were active in their advocacy and often played a significant role in their child's gifted placement by speaking out for their child. Conversely, the fact that teachers believed that minority parents were not demanding enough to ensure their child's placement in the gifted program confirms the assertions by minority parents,

Smith and Smith, (1997) who wrote that had they not been advocates for their child, she would never have been given the opportunity for gifted placement.

One teacher interviewed, whose words expressed a belief that minority parents were hesitant to interact with school because of negative experiences or feeling about school, was verified by the writings of Sankar-DeLeeuw (2007) and Huff et al (2005) who contend that feeling of intimidation from the school or feelings of inadequacy experienced by parents toward high achieving children tend to lead to decreases in minority parent advocacy. On the other hand, the same teacher told of non-minority parents who “understood the inner workings of the school” and were “in the know about testing.” How similar these statements are to those by Polite and Saenger (2003) who details an atmosphere of “insiders” and “outsiders” that lead to resentments especially if those excluded are minority groups or Huff et al (2005) who describes a parent’s words over an encounter with school as “It’s like a guarded secret.”

To increase the representation of minority students in the gifted program, examples of creating partnership among schools were given by teachers interviewed. Ideas such as creating a Gifted Information Table at Open House, talking with community members, especially in the minority community about gifted education, and explaining specifics to the general public about the gifted program, what’s available, how referrals are made were all discussed by various teachers. “More education is needed by all involved about our gifted program,” spoke one teacher, “and this includes teachers, parents, and the community.” While these statements run counter to Rubie-Davies’ et al (2006) findings that educators are not reliable judges of parent partnerships, the beliefs of the teachers interviewed did uphold the need for developing partnerships. Shumow

(1997, p. 39) cited research that implementing workshops, such as those described by the interviewed teachers, is seen as a contributor to increases in motivation and cognitive skills in the inner city.

VanTassel-Baska et al (2007) described five cultural issues that are critical to minority students and may ultimately affect academic achievement. One issue mentioned by VanTassel-Baska et al (2007) is low cultural expectations for achievement manifested in little encouragement and support. This issue was reflected in the comment of one teacher who felt that parents did not realize the significance of the gifted program and the benefits it offered to children. "Parents were often happy with the A's their child made and did not push the child to achieve higher," she reported. "If they were told more about the program, I think it would make a difference."

As they completed their interviews, three different teachers voiced similar feeling about the reason for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. It lies with the teachers themselves. In explaining that teachers cannot afford to look for giftedness in students but must focus on helping the lower performing students, the teacher who was interviewed described the deficit thinking where teachers focus on weakness rather than strengths (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Illustrations of the emphasis placed on training teachers to understand the needs of special education with no clear directives on how to recognize giftedness in students supports Callahan (2005) research that teachers are seldom provided skills in discerning alternate ways students may be gifted.

In portraying a situation where a fellow teacher choose not to support the automatic referral of a minority student for gifted because the teacher felt the minority

student was a behavior problem, mirrored the findings of Ford and Harmon (2001) that that underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program results from a lack of teacher referral. The teacher who saw giftedness in students that were not necessarily the perfect child or rule-followers defies deficit thinking where teachers focus on weakness rather than strengths (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Swanson, 2006).

Though numerous studies show a potential link between teachers' inherent beliefs and the reason for underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program (Baker, 1999; Bell, 2002; de Wet, 2006; Elhoweris et al, 2005; Gay, 2002; Grantham et al., 2005; Jamar & Pitts, 2005; Payne, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004; Siegle, 2001; & Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997), only two out of eight teachers interviewed acknowledged that the mindset of teachers could be a reason for the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Statements such as "Teachers need to look at their own behaviors and see what they communicate to minority students through body language, expectations, and ways they teach" or "It comes down to the philosophy of whether or not you really think that having minority students in a gifted program is a goal you are after" substantiate the struggle for teachers in rethinking beliefs and practices as described by Milner and Ford (2005) and Brown (2007).

*How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their ethnicities?* The findings of this researcher's study concerning whether ethnicity shapes teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program appears to confirm research cited by Elhoweris et al (2005) that the race of teachers was associated with their expectations for student

achievement with African-American teachers having slightly higher expectations for minority students. While much agreement was found between the two ethnicities represented in this study, there were three primary areas where the beliefs of the African-American teachers and the Caucasian teachers were different concerning the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students. All African-American teachers and two Caucasian teachers spoke of their beliefs about the importance of a holistic approach to determining giftedness in students, thus confirming a similar climate described by Baldwin (2002), Bouchard (2004), Maker (1996), Naglieri and Ford (2003), Pierce et al (2007), Renzulli (2002), Sarouphim (2004), Sternberg (2007), VanTassel-Baska et al (2002) and VanTassel-Baska et al (2007). The remaining majority of Caucasian teachers spoke of testing, guidelines, and demonstrations of a something they couldn't pinpoint like a spark or higher-level thinking.

On belief unique to the African-American teachers interviewed was a belief that some minority children do sabotage their placement in gifted or make an effort to prevent their inclusion in the gifted program. Such issues of peer rejection (VanTassel-Baska et al, 2007) and social influences of peer pressure (Moore et al, 2005) were also reflected in research and given as reasons for under achievement by minority students. Attempts at sabotage by minority students are described by Morris (2002) as being the result of gifted programs being filled by white students. Sabotaging gifted placement is also seen by Grantham and Ford (2003) as choices made because of social-emotional tug-of-war. According to one African-American teacher, even a defiant child may be the very gifted student that schools will overlook. "That defiance and masking of being bright just emphasizes giftedness even more," said one teacher.

A third area of differing beliefs between the two represented ethnicities was the role schools play in the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. The African-American teachers stated their belief in an improved community partnership as well as parent partnership with the school. Information about the gifted program should be shared with all involved in a minority child's education including the minority community. Supporting this belief, Huff et al (2005) describes the village approach where all adults from areas affecting minority students become involved to improve academic achievement. Moore et al (2005) tells of the holistic approach of using cultural, social, and individual factors to influence academic achievement and outcomes. This village and holistic approach would logically seem to have an impact on the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

*How are teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program shaped by their experiences?* Through their lived experiences, teachers form beliefs, attitudes, and actions that influence the instructional practices and goals in their classrooms (de Wet, 2006, p. 9). As confirmation of this assertion by de Wet, seven of the eight teachers interviewed felt that their teaching experiences and current experiences have shaped their beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

Teachers did feel that experience had shown them that grade level did shape their beliefs about giftedness in minority students. Teachers with experiences in early grades saw differences in students who may not have had the benefits of a home environment where reading and education was valued or families that could provide extensive experiences such as traveling shaped This lack of opportunity (Begoray & Slovinsky,



1997) and exposure to fewer resources (Payne, 1998; Robinson, Lanzi, Weinberg, Ramey, & Ramey, 2002) is seen as a predominate reason why students underachieve. This was confirmed by the teachers interviewed. “Why can’t we treat all kindergarten through second graders as gifted?” asked one teacher, “Then by third grade we can get serious about determining who is really gifted and everyone will have had the same experiences and enrichment.”

*Are teachers’ beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students shaped by their gifted training?* In this researcher’s study half of the respondents possessed a gifted endorsement. Knowledge about gifted education was expressed as a key to increasing the representation of minority students in the gifted program. Because they did not know the characteristics of giftedness, as confirmed by Siegle (2001) and Endepohls-Ulpe and Ruf (2005), many sensed that they had overlooked minority students who were gifted. They could begin to “bring out giftedness,” encourage creativity, and expand and broaden the challenges that they offer to minority students.

Powell and Siegle (2000) noted that teachers possessing gifted endorsements tended to rate students higher than classroom teachers, and the respondents who spoke of understanding how to expand the criteria for gifted placement and looking for the varied characteristics and qualities of the gifted student seem to validate that finding. “When I got my gifted endorsement,” one teacher declared, “my eyes were opened to multiple intelligences and indicators of giftedness present in all students,” a statement that certainly brings evidence for Powell and Siegle’s (2000) study that teachers possessing gifted endorsements concentrate more on positives or strengths in students.

## Conclusions

The fundamental beliefs held by eight classroom teachers from a small suburban school district in Georgia about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program are varied and insightful. From the interviews conducted by this researcher, several conclusions can be drawn about teachers' beliefs.

1. Teachers believe that the current testing procedures for determining gifted eligibility are flawed.
  - Using standardized tests scores is an ineffective method of determining gifted eligibility.
  - Many examples given of very bright students not testing well on the one given day for testing.
  - A student's eligibility for gifted is totally out of the hands of teachers.
  - Using different testing instruments were offered by teachers including portfolios, observations, checklists, parent input, and other assessment instruments.
2. Teachers believe they can offer creative solutions to schools and districts for addressing underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program
  - Postpone formal testing of students for the gifted program until 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.
  - Effects of an "early advantage" and experiences and resources are more equaled out in students once they are in the upper grades.
  - Create a unique yet comprehensive idea of treating all students in the early grades, kindergarten through second grade, as gifted.

3. Teachers believe there is a lack of understanding of giftedness by most teachers, and this has a direct effect on the representation of minority students in the gifted program.
  - Giftedness is difficult to define.
  - There is a lack of training for teachers as to the characteristics of giftedness
  - Teachers with gifted training spoke of the importance they found in knowing the various characteristics of giftedness pertaining to their identification of gifted students.
  - It is hard to really know children with the high class size numbers in most classrooms.
  - There is a difference between being smart and being gifted.
4. Teachers believe intelligence is dynamic and ever-changing in nature, and the potential for giftedness is present in many students.
  - There is a clear focus by teachers on the potential for giftedness.
  - The desire for a proactive plan to educate the community and parents about the gifted program speaks to the recurring teacher belief in gifted potential.
  - The potential for giftedness is found in many students but not recognized because of lack of advocacy and understanding by parents and community.
  - The atypical, defiant, less-than-perfect child was given as an example of an underrepresented gifted student by some teachers
  - Some teachers expressed the ability to sense a child that may be gifted because of knowledge they possess concerning gifted characteristics — especially the qualities that are not typically associated with giftedness.

5. Teachers believe that the lack of parent advocacy and building partnerships with community is a factor in underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs.
  - The importance of parent advocacy and partnerships was acknowledged by all teachers regardless of experience, ethnicity, and possession of gifted-endorsement.
  - School and community partnerships were discussed almost exclusively by African-American teachers.
  - Going out into the community and talking with leaders versus having the community of mostly parents come to school was a key factor to consider.
  - Teachers expressed the need for more information on the gifted program, its benefits, and how it is accessed for all involved as a way to address the underrepresentation of minority students.
  
6. Teachers believe that the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program must be reversed; however, most teachers do not see themselves as a factor in the problem.
  - All acknowledged the presence of barriers that exist and seem to perpetuate the problem.
  - Less than half the teachers even mentioned that teacher expectations, beliefs, or biases might have some impact on the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.
  - Teachers offered the pressure of high-stakes testing as the cause behind teachers only considering the needs of low performing students. .

- Sabotage by the student, including purposeful low performance and masking giftedness, was recognized as a barrier, but it was primarily a condition recognized exclusively by African-American teachers.
- Only one example was given where a teacher's actions directly blocked an automatic referral on a minority student and it was seen as a reaction to poor student behavior.
- As an example of the problem of underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program, one teacher commented, "It comes down to the philosophy of whether you really think having minority students in a gifted program is a goal you are after."

#### Implications

The changing demographics of America's educational system at the federal, state and local levels have brought increased attention to meeting the educational needs of the diverse student populations in the public schools. The state of Georgia has made efforts over the past decade to address this underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program through the implementation of multiple criteria eligibility (Krisel & Cowan, 1997). In spite of these statewide efforts, the underrepresentation of these students from diverse backgrounds still persists (McBee, 2006). Elhoweris et al (2005, p.25) point out that less than 2% of more than 4,000 articles written about gifted and talented students since 1924 were about students from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. As a way to contribute more to the writings about minority students in gifted education, this researcher's study is focused totally on exploring teachers' beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

No research could be found of any small-scaled studies, such as a study in a single school district, having been conducted to capture the personal beliefs of teachers about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. Through this researcher's in-depth study of teachers' beliefs through one-on-one interviews, this study is presented in hopes of providing information from a new perspective on the lingering concern of underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

This researcher has had personal experience as an administrator where underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program is a continuing concern. This researcher sees the underrepresentation as a problem with no readily apparent root cause. Giving teachers a "voice from the trenches" has not only given a different point of view in this continuing dialogue but has also created informal discussions, within schools and among teachers, about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.

This study has also brought to light several suggestions from the "trenches" of ways teachers, schools, and districts can increase their awareness of the continuing underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. This study has already created informal discussions within schools and among teachers about the underrepresentation of minority students and should continue to present an avenue for discussions about ways to implement change to the gifted program increasing the representation of minority students.

As a discussion springboard, this study may provide teachers and schools with the following topics: (1) a talking point about their personal beliefs and need to confront their biases about minority students, (2) a voice to the concerns about the effects of IQ

testing on representation of minority students, (3) suggestions from teachers on additional and alternate methods of determining gifted placement, (4) express the concerns of teachers about high-stakes testing and how it impacts their inability to focus on areas such as gifted identification and potential for giftedness while insisting on focusing only on low-performing students or special education students, and (5) a challenge to schools to consider ways to inform and educate all parents and community members especially members of minority communities about the benefits of the gifted program and ways to advocate for minority students.

### Recommendations

There are several recommendations offered by this researcher.

1. It is the recommendation of this researcher that similar studies be conducted in other school districts to allow more teachers across the state of Georgia the opportunity to share beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.
2. It is the recommendation of this researcher that similar studies be conducted with specific focus groups such as gifted teachers and district gifted coordinators allow those groups the opportunity to share beliefs about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program.
3. It is the recommendation of this researcher that studies, quantitative and qualitative, be conducted comparing the effect of Georgia's multiple criteria eligibility on increasing the underrepresentation of minority students in state and district level gifted programs.

### Dissemination

There are several groups that this researcher has identified as interested in the results of this study. During the process of conducting this study, several teachers interviewed stated that they had personally generated some informal discussions, within their schools and among their colleagues, about the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program. This researcher's plan is three-fold, to provide a hard copy of this dissertation to the district's resource center where teachers have access privileges, to present the findings of this study to the district's superintendent, and submit this study for publication as a contribution to professional literature in the field of gifted education.

### Concluding Thoughts

At one point during this study, a teacher made a statement that spoke to what this researcher sees as the heart of the problem faced by educators concerning minority students' representation in the gifted program. She quietly told of "stumbling on a child" that seemed to be gifted. "I stumbled," she said, "because I wasn't even looking for gifted students my classroom."

Just as this teacher admitted to this researcher, I wonder how many times we, as educators, stumble around our classrooms or schools and overlook the potential for talent and giftedness in students simply because the expectation is not there in our own mind. Is that rightly our decision to make?



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## APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCHER'S INITIAL DRAFT

The following interview questions are formulated by the researcher:

1. Have you had an opportunity in the past to make a gifted referral on a student you were teaching? Tell me about your experience with the process?
2. When you consider referring a student for the gifted program, what process do you follow?
3. What are some of the things you consider as you go through the gifted referral process?
4. Is there any particular aspect of your teaching experience that seems to have a strong influence on how you recognize giftedness in students? How could a teacher's grade level have an influence? How might the number of years of teaching experience have an influence?
5. Do you think having a gifted-endorsement has any affect on how a teacher recognizes giftedness in students? How?
6. Has there been a time recently that you either taught a minority student or knew of a minority student that you felt was very bright but was not referred to the gifted program? Why do you think something like that occurs? Is there anything that can be done to address a situation like this if it occurs?
7. When you think back on the gifted referral process followed in your school district have you noticed any consistent trends for identifying students? Tell me about them.
8. Have you noticed any barriers that exist preventing a student from being referred for the gifted program?

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCHER'S INITIAL DRAFT

(continued)

9. How do you think a school district might go about addressing the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program?

## APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCHER'S FINAL DRAFT

The following interview questions will be used in this qualitative study:

1. Have you had an opportunity in the past to make a gifted referral on a student you were teaching? Tell me about your experience with the process?
2. When you consider referring a student for the gifted program, what process do you personally follow?
3. What are some of the indicators you consider as you go through the gifted referral process?
4. Is there any particular aspect of your teaching experience that seems to have a strong influence on how you recognize giftedness in students? In general, do you think a teacher's grade level have an influence on how a teacher recognizes giftedness in students? How? Do you think the number of years of teaching experience have an influence? How?
5. Do you think having a gifted-endorsement has any affect on how a teacher recognizes giftedness in students? How?
6. Has there been a time recently that you either taught a minority student or knew of a minority student that you felt was very bright but was not referred to the gifted program? Why do you think something like that occurs? Is there anything that can be done locally to address a situation like this if it occurs? What about at the state level?
7. When you think back on the gifted referral process followed in your school district have you noticed any consistent trends for identifying students? Tell me about them.

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCHER'S FINAL DRAFT

(continued)

8. Have you noticed any barriers that exist preventing a student from being referred for the gifted program?
9. How do you think an individual teacher might go about addressing the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program? How do you think a school district might go about addressing the underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted program?

## APPENDIX C

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES &  
SPONSORED PROGRAMS

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

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**To:** Pamela H. Colvin  
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**CC:** Dr. Linda Arthur  
P.O. Box-8131

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Date:** December 6, 2007

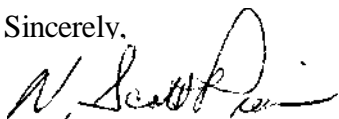
**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered: **H08095**, and titled "**Exploring Teacher's Beliefs about the Underrepresentation of Minority Students in the Gifted Program in a Small Suburban City School District in Georgia**", it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.*

**This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter.** If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed

Sincerely,



N. Scott Pierce  
Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs