

An Exploration of the Experiences of Four Gifted Children  
In the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island

A Thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Education

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Education

University of Prince Edward Island

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Hunter River, PE

December 2006

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*ISBN: 978-0-494-32088-4*

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*ISBN: 978-0-494-32088-4*

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### Abstract

This research is a qualitative study that uses the case study approach to explore the experiences of gifted students in the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island. Prince Edward Island does not formally identify gifted students and does not have any programs directed towards gifted students. Four middle school students, 2 females and 2 males, were asked to participate in this research study along with their parents. The students were identified by their teachers as having outstanding talents relative to their peers in mathematics, language arts, French, and music, which satisfies the United States Department of Education definition of giftedness (1993). Semi-structured interviews with the participants, the students and their parents, resulted in several common themes emerging. Despite finding school boring at times, which is a common experience for gifted students (Gallagher, 1997; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003), the student participants generally found school very enjoyable. A vibrant extracurricular life seemed to be very important to these students and added enjoyment to their school life. The student participants had never been challenged by anything they encountered in the educational system; they all expressed a desire for more challenge in their school work. Except for one student who had taken part in a pull-out enrichment program in elementary school, none of the students had experienced a differentiation of instruction (Tomlinson, 2002). None of the students had been formally identified as being gifted or academically talented and they did not report any significant differences in the ways they were taught compared with their classmates.



Dedication

To my wife for her encouragement,  
and to Dr. Timmons for guidance.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following people who helped to make this research possible: The students who participated in this research and their parents, Dr. Vianne Timmons for commitment to this project that was unwavering, and Dr. Basil Favaro for thoroughly reviewing, and greatly improving the draft. I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues who were always there to discuss this project. Finally, I would like to thank my family who supported me through the research process.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

My goal as a teacher has always been to connect with every student as much as possible. This goal has been realized with varying degrees of success. As any classroom teacher in a middle school can tell you, it is difficult to make contact with every student on any given day. For me, making contact with students in an educational environment includes uncovering how they are experiencing classroom learning and school life. Are they prepared to learn? Is there anything that is happening to them at home that I should be aware of that would affect their school experience? What are the strengths and limitations they bring to their learning environment? Are they getting what they need to learn effectively in the classroom?

I am interested in all students, but I am especially interested in those students who are found in the margins, the students who are not “normal” or not looked upon as being average students with no problems. The students that really catch my interest are the ones who seem to be having difficulties in school for whatever reason. Therefore, when I started the Master of Education program I knew that my research would be action-oriented with concrete recommendations for improving the lives of students who experience difficulties in school. I decided on working with students that are referred to as gifted, or academically gifted. I chose this group of students to work with because in the school system in Prince Edward Island (PEI) gifted students receive very little attention. I have heard many teachers’ comments about gifted students, including “if they are so smart, why do we have to worry about them, they will do well no matter what.” From my experience at the intermediate level, students will not achieve their full potential if their special needs are not addressed.

The initial spark that ignited the flames of this research into gifted students was a very unusual student. The student had been sent to a psychologist by his parents in an effort to determine why he was doing so poorly at school. The psychologist determined the student was very intelligent. He had an extensive vocabulary and could discuss many topics at a level far above his classmates. However, he could barely perform handwriting and his printing was also difficult to read. The handwriting and printing problems created embarrassment and frustration for this student which in turn detracted from his enjoyment of school. I had a nephew who experienced similar problems, he was diagnosed as being very intelligent yet he could not write. The nephew, and my student, were both able to address their problems by the use of assistive technologies, a lap top computer, graphic programs, and word processing technologies. Research led to my discovery that grapho-motor difficulties are common among gifted students (Neihart, 2000). What I found very interesting about these students and their grapho-motor difficulties was that a person could be very bright, possibly gifted, and also have a learning disability.

The next incident that guided the choice of this research was closer to home; it involved my own daughter and the difficulties she encountered in the school system. My daughter had a very easy time in the early years of her schooling, so easy that it caused problems. My daughter would finish her work early and then start reading “chapter books” waiting for the rest of the class to finish their work. When they did read, the rest of the students were mainly reading much smaller books at the time. Her teacher was quite upset with my daughter and thought the reading was inappropriate. The teacher felt my daughter stood out because of her reading material and smaller books would be more appropriate. The teacher also felt she should not be reading to fill in time. As parents we had a choice, support our daughter or the teacher. We ended up sending

our daughter to a private school where she was challenged and the problem was resolved.

My daughter's experience with a lack of challenge made me think about how she would cope in my classroom. I would have problems challenging my daughter in my classroom. I spend most of my individual teaching time with needy students, and I generally teach to, if not the neediest student in the class, the portion of the class that academically performs at a low level. I had to admit that my daughter would be bored in my classroom for a great deal of the time.

The situations with my daughter, my nephew, and the student with the poor handwriting who was very bright, but not doing well in school, culminated in my desire to research gifted students. Uncovering the school lives of gifted students is a broad topic and I would have liked to narrow it down, however, the field of study in Prince Edward Island was wide open as almost no research had been done regarding gifted students. Timmons and Woods (2000) reviewed the history of gifted education in Prince Edward Island and found that there were no programs for gifted students or methods to identify academically talented learners. When I started this research there were still no programs to identify gifted students or to provide instruction aimed at responding to the needs of the gifted learner. The question I now had was how best to go about studying gifted learners?

I originally thought I would do a quantitative study as I had done an honours thesis using quantitative methods. I was comfortable with performing statistical analysis. During my course work in the Master of Education program, I was exposed to qualitative research and I thought that a case study approach to qualitative research would be an ideal way to explore the experiences of gifted students in the PEI school system. Qualitative research allows me to share

the stories of actual gifted students as they experience the educational system. Using the case study approach to do exploratory research allowed me to investigate at a deeper level what it is like to be a gifted student in the PEI school system from the viewpoint of a very small group of gifted learners. Qualitative research freed me from the need to produce results that were statistically meaningful or results that could be generalized to other populations.

The field of research with respect to educating gifted students in Prince Edward Island is largely unexamined. My hope is that my research will be a springboard for further research into the needs of gifted students, learners who are operating largely “under the radar” at this time in Prince Edward Island. Some possible research areas that could be explored beyond this study include boredom and the gifted student, what can be done to reduce the boredom associated with school work for gifted students, and how their experiences compare with their peers.

Additionally, the scope and depth of enjoyment that some gifted students experience is not explored in this thesis. Do gifted students enjoy things that are fundamentally different from their peers? Does the content area that a student is gifted in affect his or her enjoyment? What is the long term affect of enjoyment or lack of enjoyment in school on academic achievement?

Any of the questions above could be researched in combination with learning disabilities, ability grouping, identification, and/or differentiation of instruction.

### *The Setting*

This research was conducted in Prince Edward Island, Canada, which is the smallest province in the country. The entire school population in Prince Edward Island from grades one to twelve in the 2005-6 school year was 22, 202 students. The population of Prince Edward Island is mainly of European descent with Scottish, Irish, and English being the largest groups of



settlers. There is a relatively small group of Acadians in Prince Edward Island, who are descended from the French. There is also a relatively small Aboriginal population in Prince Edward Island. Most of the students at the site of this research are caucasian.

This research was performed in a middle school which houses grades 7 through 9 in a dual track school (English and French Immersion). Students in the French Immersion program study social studies and science in French as well as taking language arts in French. Approximately a quarter of the school's population is in French Immersion. The school is in a region that has a large number of people of Acadian descent and this population is represented in the school.

The primary industries in the region where the school is located are agriculture, government, and tourism.

The school population where this research was conducted lacks the racial diversity of a bigger centre in Canada. The teaching staff also reflects this lack of racial diversity as there are no visible minorities at the school.

### *The Researcher*

I have been a teacher in the education system of Prince Edward Island for almost ten years. All of my teaching within the education system has taken place at one middle school, other than practicums while obtaining my Bachelor of Education degree. I teach in a wonderful new woodshop that I helped design and I also teach science in a regular classroom. Prior to teaching in the education system, I taught many non-traditional topics including: wilderness skills, log-building, and construction related courses. Watching people learn skills or obtain knowledge that might benefit them in a practical way is probably the most satisfying part about

teaching for me, followed closely by the development of relationships formed with fellow learners. I am always amazed how much there is to learn about the art of teaching. The more I learn about teaching, the more I want to learn. It seems that every new understanding is an eye-opening experience that allows me to look at old situations through fresh eyes.

This research has provided an opportunity for in depth reflection, especially through the intensive literature review stage and actual writing process. All of the information that I sifted through and processed caused me to reflect more deeply on my own teaching. I agree with Cole and Knowles (2000) that it is important for teachers to reflect on their teaching and in so doing to contribute to the knowledge base. As teachers we are more than just consumers of knowledge who move the information down the line to our students (Cole & Knowles). Our reflections as teachers must be valued as a part of the research that we can do as teacher-practitioners.

I see myself as a teacher who does research. For me, being a teacher and a researcher are mutually inclusive. My research is affected by my personal reflections that occur as I teach and as I think about what I read in the literature and how it might affect my teaching.

#### Overview

Although gifted education is not something that is practised in Prince Edward Island, there is a long history of gifted education elsewhere. Terman in 1925 produced what Glass (2004) calls the “seminal study of giftedness” (p. 26) after tracking the lives of more than 1,000 highly intelligent children. Terman had what would be called today a very elitist attitude towards the students in his study. Summarizing his results to the 1922 American Psychological Association, Terman stated gifted children are, “superior to unselected children in physique, health, and social adjustment; [and] marked by superior moral attitudes” (Terman, 1925 as cited

in Glass, p. 26). According to Glass, the identification of gifted students gained scientific credibility following Terman's work and the first work towards teaching gifted children began in the early 1950s.

The issue of what is giftedness, or what are the characteristics of a gifted student is still debated. Standardized intelligence tests are no longer the single criterion for assessing giftedness as was the case in the past (Bracy, 1994, as cited in Glass, 2004). Gardner (1993, as cited in Sternberg, 2000) proposed a multiple-intelligence model where not just spatial and logical intelligences are looked at, which is what most standardized tests focus on. Kinesthetic, linguistic, musical, social, and emotional intelligences are also considered by Gardner as part of overall intelligence, and need to be considered in terms of what giftedness is.

Renzulli (2002), one of the world's foremost researchers in gifted education, has developed a theory after studying what he considered to be gifted individuals. His analysis led him to conclude that three traits comprise gifted behaviour: task commitment, creativity, and above-average ability. The standardized intelligence test measures what Renzulli would call above-average ability, however, according to Renzulli, the other two traits are present in gifted individuals as well. The traits are found in differing degrees amongst gifted individuals and all the traits can be developed further if the right environment is present. Renzulli has put his theories into practise in many schools after testing them at a centre for gifted education located at the University of Connecticut. Renzulli's definition of giftedness is much more inclusive than Terman's as Renzulli considers the top 15-20% of learners to be in the above-average ability group and capable of developing the other gifted traits of creativity and task commitment.

Reis and McCoach (2002) suggest that common attributes of giftedness are problem-

solving ability, well developed memory, insight, advanced interests inquiry, reasoning, and communication skills. The gifted student may be highly motivated and have a well developed sense of humour. The gifted student may only possess some of the attributes mentioned above. No matter how gifted students are defined, they perform very well on standardized intelligent tests and achievement tests (Stormont, Stebbing, & Holliday, 2001).

The definition of giftedness that primarily guided the selection of the participants in this research comes from United States Department of Education (1993):

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high capability in intellectual, creative, an/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavour. (as cited in Renzulli, 2000, p. 70)

The definition above encapsulates many of the definitions of the theorists and writers on the subject of gifted education that were examined. According to Glass (2004), most programs that are directed toward gifted education are populated primarily by white, middle class students, and the majority of the students are male. The definition above accounts for culturally-biased, or gender-biased identification procedures that lead to excluding segments of society. Gifted children are the ones who are found on one end of the range of talent. Gifted children have outstanding talents. As Winebrenner (2001) suggests, we now realize that some struggling

students with special needs are performing at levels which entitle them to special services and support to help them cope and reach their full potential. Winebrenner suggests gifted students are at the other end of the continuum from students with special needs, but they also require a differentiated curriculum to help them reach their full potential.

### *Goal of Research*

My goal in conducting this exploratory piece of research using qualitative methods, specifically the case study approach, was to examine a few cases thoroughly. The study focuses on the educational experiences of four students with whom I have worked at the intermediate school level. I will not be attempting to provide an extensive analysis of what it means to be gifted in the PEI educational system. The in-depth look at the experiences of four academically talented students in this research will serve as a starting point for future research. This research will also contribute to the debate regarding the education of academically talented students in Prince Edward Island.

The idea of initiating the debate on how to deal with individuals who have outstanding talent in the academic world is fundamentally important in Prince Edward Island since this group of learners is largely ignored at the present time. I feel that an exploratory study can only help to raise awareness of what it means to be a gifted learner. Awareness will hopefully lead to action.

### *Limitations of Study*

This qualitative inquiry was meant to be exploratory in nature. There was no interest in making generalizations from the findings. The case study method of research allowed me to delve in depth into the educational experiences of the student participants involved. It allowed time to engage students in semi-structured interviews which varied in length depending upon the

depth and relevance of the experiences shared. Even though I am confident that the information the students transmitted to me, which was verified by interviewing their parents is valid, it is important to realize that I interviewed only four students. These four students satisfied the definition of giftedness that I chose. They were selected to participate in this research because they were academically talented in the areas I selected: mathematics, language arts, French, and music. Other students could have been selected for their outstanding talents in other subjects, such as social studies or science, or outstanding talent in sports or in the arts. Other students' experiences in the educational system may have varied greatly from the students who participated in this research.

This research examines one dimension of giftedness, outstanding academic talent. The full range of students that display gifted behaviour is large (Renzulli, 2002). Groups who could have been researched include gifted students with learning disabilities (McCoach, 2001; Winebrenner, 2003), gifted students who are underachievers (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003; Reis, 2002), gifted students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and gifted students classified by gender (Stormont, 2001). This research makes no attempt to discover the experiences of all gifted students in the PEI educational system; therefore, the results are limited to the participants involved.

As noted above, another limitation of this study is the lack of diversity in the student and teaching populations at the school where this study was conducted. The experiences of gifted students in a more racially diverse population might be quite different from the students in a school that is composed almost exclusively of one race. It is my hope that educators in Prince Edward Island will find it useful to have documentation of the experiences of gifted students.

They will hopefully recognize situations similar to ones that they encounter. This research could provide them with alternative ways of reaching outstanding students in their classes, or at least be a launching point for their own inquiries into teaching academically gifted students.

*Theoretical Framework Used to Study the Experiences of Gifted Students*

This research employs the case study approach as a method of qualitative inquiry. The case study uses a phenomenological approach to investigate what it is like to be in the shoes of gifted students everyday in school. “Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some-‘thing’ what it is - and without which it could not be what it is” (Van Manen, 1990 as cited in Patton, p.482). Phenomenology seeks to understand the meaning of a particular phenomenon as understood by the person experiencing it. In the case of this research, the phenomenon is the experience of being a gifted student in one particular educational system. A typical use of the phenomenological approach is to make sense of everyday occurrences by obtaining a deeper understanding of those experiences (Patton, 2002). It is also assumed in this phenomenological framework, that the participants reflecting on their experiences are the best source of information on what it is like to experience the phenomenon under investigation. Patton specifically cites the need for in-depth interviews with the individuals who experienced the phenomenon first hand.

The phenomenon that constitutes the case study could be a country, an organization, a relationship, or an emotion, “anything that presents itself to consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology, whether the object is real or imagined, empirically measurable or subjectively felt” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The experiences of the students and their parents involved in this research were felt subjectively and reported in an interview format that coincides

perfectly with the phenomenological tradition of research.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The students who were involved in this investigation were recruited from a middle school located in the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island. Prince Edward Island is the smallest province in Canada with a total population in 2005 of 138,113. Three elected school boards, two English and one French, serve a total school population of 22,202 students. There are a total of 70 public schools, six of which are French first language schools. There are also four private schools. In 2004-2005 the three school boards had 1,486 full-time equivalent teachers and 249 full-time educational assistants. This results in an overall teacher to student ratio of 1 to 15, and an overall educational assistant to student ratio of 1 to 89 in the three school boards (Department of Education, 2005).

The vision statement in the Department of Education's Strategic Plan states that "all individuals have the opportunity to develop their full social, intellectual, economic, cultural, and physical potential (Department of Education, 2005, p. 13). Under its guiding principles the Strategic Plan states "all learners have the right to access learning opportunities to enable them to reach their full potential" (p. 13). Prince Edward Island participated in the 2003 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) "so educators can determine how much our students have learned from birth to age 15, when compared to other provinces and countries" (Department of Education, 2005, p. 26). Prince Edward Island students scored the lowest in the country in

math and problem solving, and tied for the lowest scores in the country in reading and science.

Only math, reading, science, and problem solving were assessed in the 2003 PISA.

According to the Task Force on Student Achievement recommendations, many initiatives to improve student achievement in Prince Edward Island were suggested. One of these initiatives is to provide enrichment for academically talented students. Specifically, Kurial (2005), in one of the recommendations suggests, “the Department of Education develop a strategy for students who need academic enrichment” (p. 6). Many experts in the field of gifted education agree that academic enrichment is a fundamental part of any program directed towards gifted learners (Lupart & Macae, 1991; Renzulli, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999; Winebrenner, 2003).

Timmons and Wood (2000) reported that there were no gifted education programs or policies in place in Prince Edward Island at the time they did their research. A conversation with a Department of Education (personal communication, Debbie McKenna, June 19, 2006) official revealed that, in 2006, nothing has changed in terms of policy or programs directed towards academically gifted students. There are no written programs or policies. The question that naturally arises is whether or not academically gifted students in PEI are reaching their full potential. In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to examine the literature in relation to the education of academically gifted students.

This literature review examines both primary research in which authors have collected their own data, and secondary research in which authors have used the data collected by others, in an effort to shed light on the best approaches to educating students who are academically gifted.

While the articles selected for this literature review span the last 20, I have put more

emphasis on those that have been published in the last 10 years. This is done to reflect current thinking on the topic of educating students who are academically gifted.

This literature review is summarized thematically. Firstly, what is a gifted learner? Definitions of giftedness usually include a discussion of intelligence as it relates to being academically gifted, and also the concept of multiple intelligences.

The second theme examined is the diversity amongst academically gifted students. Students who are academically gifted do not represent a homogeneous group with identical strengths and weaknesses. No matter what definition of giftedness is used there is no “one-size-fits-all” statement that encompasses the abilities of every academically gifted learner.

The third theme examined is the concept of academically gifted students who also have a learning disability. The very notion that someone could be academically gifted in certain areas yet have a learning disability may be counter-intuitive at first glance, but there is a wide body of literature supporting this concept.

The fourth theme in this review focuses on the identification of academically gifted students. How exactly are the academically gifted identified and what are the criteria for doing so? The identification of the gifted and the methods used to identify academically gifted learners are related to the fundamental question of what it means to be gifted.

Unfortunately, academically gifted students do not always stand out in the crowd and their unique talents are not always detected. If the potential of these students is missed by educators, can this failure to identify them as being academically gifted lead to underachievement? This is the fifth theme that is discussed.

The sixth theme is the research that focuses on strategies for teaching academically gifted

students. The major strategies examined are differentiation, compaction, and ability grouping.

The last theme in this review deals with the attitudes of the participants in programs for gifted students and the attitudes of their parents in relation to their children's participation in these programs. Issues facing teachers of academically gifted students are included in this section.

### *What is a Gifted Learner?*

"The continuing evolution of the definition of giftedness encompasses an increasingly more diverse set of capabilities and consequently includes a greater number of children"(McCoach, Kehle, Bray, & Siegle, 2001, p. 403). It would be convenient if there was one simple tidy definition of giftedness, however, there is not. An individual could be gifted in the area of gymnastics, or chess, or architecture; basically with anything that humans do, there is a range of ability with gifted being the high end. This literature review will focus on students that are gifted in the area of academics, students that are academically gifted or gifted learners.

Reis and McCoach, (2002) suggest that common attributes of giftedness are problem-solving ability, well developed memory, insight, advanced interests inquiry, reasoning, and communication skills. The gifted student may be highly motivated and have a well developed sense of humour. The gifted student may possess only some of the attributes mentioned above.

Porath (1996) states that, in general, gifted learners are highly motivated, but not always in the classroom. Porath says that gifted learners are self-directed in general, but their direction may lead to dissatisfaction with the regular curriculum as they have "the need to fight boredom, to seek a challenge, or to experiment with the unknown" (p. 13).

Gifted students can also be identified because of the high scores they attain on

intelligence tests. There have been suggestions that a score on a standardized test for intelligence like the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised Edition (WISC-R) for a gifted child will be in the area of 130 (Nielsen, 2002), which places the individual in the top 2% of scores on that test. No matter how gifted students are defined, they perform well on standardized intelligence tests and achievement tests (Stormont et al., 2001).

McCoach et al. (2001) suggest that the most inclusive definition of giftedness comes from United States Department of Education:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavour. (p.26)

### *The Role of Intelligence Testing in Determining who is Gifted*

Traditionally, the use of a standardized intelligence test has played an important role in the identification of the gifted. When the standardized intelligence test is used as a screening device for entrance into programs for gifted students, those enrolled tend to be “predominantly white and middle class” (Glass, 2004). Terman (1926, as cited in Renzulli, 2002) had a very conservative view of giftedness and suggested that only those testing in the top 1% of a general intellectual ability test like the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale could be considered gifted. Presently there is much more emphasis on alternative testing that takes into consideration the measurement of “diverse abilities, talents, strengths and needs” (Glass, p. 12). The United States Department of Education’s definition of giftedness, quoted above, mentions the need to consider

the “remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment” (McCoach et al., 2001). For example, learning to talk is an area in which gifted children will often display their extraordinary abilities in language development and by the age of two or three, many gifted children have extensive vocabularies and the use of complex sentence structure (Glass).

It is necessary, says Sternberg (2000), when trying to measure intelligence, to differentiate between what Renzulli (1986, as cited in Sternberg) calls schoolhouse gifted individuals, those that are gifted academically, and those that will demonstrate their gifts outside of the school environments by making lasting contributions.

Gardner’s (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences and Sternberg’s (2000) Theory of Triarchic Analysis both suggest that the mathematical-logistical and linguistic aptitude models of intelligence do not fully capture what intelligence is. Gardner has added spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and natural intelligences to mathematical and linguistic intelligences that must be considering when determining giftedness. Gardner argues that using only logical abilities to describe intelligence is wrong. Also, determining that outstanding ability in dance is a talent while outstanding ability in mathematics is intelligence, is arbitrary.

Fasko (2001), in his review of the literature regarding theories of multiple intelligence, cites the problems of having too narrow a definition of intelligence. He also addresses the idea that multiple intelligences are in fact merely abilities and identifies a need to get to an underlying intelligence that is responsible for those abilities. In conclusion, Fasko determines that multiple intelligence theory has something valuable to add to the identification of gifted and talented children but more research has do be done.

Sternberg (2000) has analyzed the contributions of gifted individuals and determined that rather than types of intelligence, there are three main patterns of intelligence: analytical, practical and creative. An individual can have any combination of the three patterns. Gifted individuals will excel in any one or combination of Sternberg's three patterns. The analytical pattern of intelligence deals with problem-solving, the spatial, mathematical-logistical type of intelligence. The practical pattern of intelligence deals with the ability to put one's ideas across to others; to put one's intelligence into action. The creative pattern deals with formulating new ways to deal with a problem or new insights that lead to the discovery of new problems. Sternberg (2000) cites people like Ghandi, whose vision of non-violent reform changed India, as an example of someone who possesses not only the creative pattern, coming up with new ways to address old problems, but also a practical pattern of intelligence in that they can get their ideas across well to others. Sternberg suggests that universities have an abundance of practical-analytic types, because that type of intelligence is prevalent among professors whose ability to analyse complex issues and communicate their ideas is critical to their work. Renzulli (2002) has used behaviours rather than patterns of thinking to identify gifted individuals.

### *Using Behaviour to Identify the Gifted*

Recognizing multiple intelligences and not simply equating intelligence with abilities in the areas of spatial relations or mathematics and logic has broadened the definition of giftedness. Renzulli (2002) has shifted the thinking on identification of the gifted from searching for intelligence, as measured by standardized tests, to examining behaviours to determine giftedness.

He proposed a theory which suggests that there are gifted behaviours and not simply

gifted people, and also that we must look beyond intellectual ability when considering what it is to be gifted. Gifted behaviours fall into three clusters that form his three-ring conception of giftedness, namely, above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment. Renzulli (2002) defines gifted behaviours as:

Gifted behaviour consists of behaviours that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—above-average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Individuals capable of developing gifted behaviours are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance. Persons who manifest or are capable of developing an interaction among the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services that are not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programs. (Renzulli & Reis, 1997, as cited in Renzulli, p. 70)

Renzulli (2002) states that above-average ability is found in the top 15-20% of any particular human endeavour and that ability is something that remains relatively constant over time. Task commitment and creativity are not constant, but rather are both related to the particular context in which the individual is placed in. Levels of task commitment and creativity may change throughout a person's life. The fact that task commitment and creativity are subject to change means that testing for gifted abilities is not something that can be done once to yield a precise indication of the presence of gifted behaviours. In Renzulli's model of gifted behaviour, personality and environment are constantly interacting with above-average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Lupart and MacRae (1991) point out that Renzulli's model seems to allow the possibility that students could be "gifted and other times



not” (p. 7).

Another challenge with Renzulli’s (2002) model of gifted behaviour is the trait of creativity and how to measure it. Do you measure the creative accomplishment or the creative process? Renzulli says that “given that creativity tests may not measure all dimensions of creativity, it is necessary to focus attention on alternative methods to assess this complex manifestation of human behaviour”( p. 72). Lupart and MacRae (1991) argue that although Renzulli’s model will require further refinement, it has worked well in practise and has had greater success than traditional identification methods.

#### *A Practical Identification Model*

Fischetti, Emanuelson, and Shames (1998) examined an identification program for gifted students in the Westport Public School system located in Fairfield County, Connecticut. “Westport is an affluent, suburban town” (p. 161) with a school population of 3,600 students in three elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. Only 9% of the students do not go on to college, 84% go on after graduation to four-year colleges.

Westport has had a gifted program for 25 years but it has had problems in the identification and selection of students to the gifted program. Parental pressure was one of the factors that affected selection of students to the program. The other factors that influenced selection into the gifted program were “classroom teacher’s observations, knowledge of gifted behaviours, and classroom experiences” (Fischetti et al., 1998, p. 162).

The staff of the Westport schools did not feel that the methods outlined above to identify students for their gifted program were adequate. The methods that they used led to a gender imbalance and too much variation in the intellectual levels of those selected to the program.

There were twice as many males in the program as females. It was felt that the variation in intellectual levels led to difficulties in delivering instruction to those students that were selected to the gifted program.

The Westport gifted program moved to a program of identification that involves six separate components. The goal of the program is to select students who measure at or above the 99th percentile in intellectual ability, but also demonstrate higher order thinking skills in their classroom performance, and demonstrate intellectual sophistication. The problem was how to select the students in an unbiased manner.

Parents and educators were advised through professional development activities of the selection process for the gifted program so that appropriate portfolios could be assembled. The six components used to identify the gifted students were a “referral form, a student rating questionnaire, examples of classroom performance, a parental assessment questionnaire, the Otis- Lennon School Ability Test, and performance based assessment” (p. 164). The student rating questionnaire sought to compare the behaviours of the applicants with the behaviours that are usually associated with gifted students, a device similar to that used by Renzulli and Hartman (1971, as cited in Fischetti et al). The Otis-Lennon School Ability Test measures general reasoning ability and non-verbal and verbal ability similar to the WISC-III which will be discussed in the next section of this review. The parental assessment questionnaire gives insight into the student’s activities outside of school. The examples of classroom performance were presented in a portfolio that includes three examples of student work; this could be a video, a research project, or an assignment from class. The performance based assessment looks at mathematics and language arts tasks that simulate the regular classroom and can be evaluated by

the selection committee.

The screening committee was made up of classroom teachers, administrators, an instructional support teacher, a school psychologist, a teacher of the gifted, and the Coordinator of Psychological Services (Fischetti, et al., 1998). The goal was to get as complete as possible a picture of every applicant as possible in a manner that does not include undue bias.

This identification process was evaluated in a two-step process and is subject to on-going review in the future. The first step in the evaluation process was a Likert-scale type questionnaire which was given to teachers in the school system. The questionnaire was designed to determine if the identification process met the needs of the teachers. A consultant was brought in to evaluate the program as well and determined if the identification process had performed well and “enabled the discrimination of the very bright from the truly gifted student in Westport” (Fischetti, et al., 1998, p. 162).

#### *Diversity Amongst Academically Gifted Learners*

Gifted learners are not all the same. According to Fishkin and Kampsider (1996) gifted learners actually have greater diversity in their sub-scale scores on intelligence tests than average students. The measurement device that Fishkin and Kampsider used was the WISC-III intelligence test. This measurement device yielded three scores: a performance score, a verbal score, and a full scale score called the full scale IQ. The performance score and the verbal score were each made up of five sub-scales. Three more optional scales may contribute to these scores. The participants in Fishkin and Kampsider’s research were students that were in gifted programs or that were eligible for gifted programs. The 21 girls and the 21 boys in the study were between grades 4-8.

The scores the 42 participants received on the WISC-III were compared to the scores of 2,200 children in a standardized sample. The results showed that the gifted children had a statistically significant difference between their performance and verbal scores when compared to the average children. The gifted children had statistically higher verbal scores than performance scores. The results also showed that the gifted children had a statistical difference in scatter on the sub-tests. In other words, they had more variation on the sub-tests than you would expect by chance. As a group, there are more differences between individuals in their group than you would find in an average group of students. As noted, the performance scales were the lowest, specifically digit span, object assembly, and block design. Digit span involves recalling a span of numbers after a period of time. Object assembly involves making a pattern from a set of blocks according to a plan. Block design calls for using spatial abilities to determine what a block design looks like when rotated in space. Interestingly, gifted students actually performed lower than the mean for the 2,200 children in the standardized sample in the block design sub-scale.

Using the predecessor of the WISC-III, the WISC, Silver and Clampitt (1990 as cited in Fishkin & Kampsnider, 1996) found that the discrepancy in performance scores and verbal scores among gifted students becomes greater as their full scale IQ increases. Again, it is the performance score that is lower than the verbal score. Differences of "21 points occur in 20% of children whose larger sub-test quotient is 130 and in 25% of children whose larger quotient is 140" (p. 3).

In Fishkin and Kampsnider (1996) there was a statistically significant variation of abilities, as measured by an intelligence test, amongst gifted students. There is another group of gifted students to consider where there is a great diversity – gifted students that have learning

disabilities.

*Gifted Students with Learning Disabilities*

Teachers at my school have a tremendous amount of difficulty with the idea that a student might be academically gifted while at the same time have a learning disability. The idea that a student can achieve a high level on an intelligence test yet have trouble completing assignments, or is not able to perform handwriting tasks seems to be counter-intuitive to some teachers.

The United States Office of Education (USOE, 1977, as cited in McCoach et al., 2001, p. 404) defines a learning disability as:

A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such terms do not include children who have learning difficulties that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

Gifted with a learning disability (G/LD) describes a group of learners who have many of the traits of the gifted learner along with a wide range of learning disabilities. The giftedness and the learning disabilities are unique to the individuals possessing them. McCoach et al., (2001) state that the key to identifying gifted students with learning disabilities is that there is a “large difference between their level of performance in a particular academic area and their general

intellectual ability” (p. 403).

Gifted students with learning disabilities have the ability of the academically gifted student to “grapple with complexity” (McCoach et al, 2001 p. 404) but will display an additional range of characteristics (Reis & McCoach, 2002) that may include any or all of the following: frustration with mastering academic skills, poor organization, supersensitivity, disruptive behaviour, perfectionism, unrealistic self-expectations, low self-esteem and poor social skills. Reis and McCoach (2002) relate the story of a typical underachieving G/LD learner who is inattentive at school, fidgets, cannot stay on task, yet can focus on complex rocket building projects for hours at home in the company of a parent. At school the student is not challenged. The student is misdiagnosed as being Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); the real problem is that the student is bored with the work presented.

The phenomenon of being academically gifted and having a learning disability is not that uncommon. McEachern and Bornot (2001) suggest that somewhere between 2% and 10% of all the children enrolled in gifted programs have learning disabilities. Of those gifted students with learning disabilities, 41% are not diagnosed until college (McEachern & Bornot). This does not take into account all the gifted students who have not even been identified.

Weinfield, Jeweller, and Barnes-Robinson (2003) suggest that research indicates between 2% and 5% of all students, or approximately one student per classroom, are G/LD (Dix & Schafer; Whitmore, 1981, as cited in Weinfield et al., 2003).

The identification of the gifted student with a learning disability is somewhat more difficult than the identification of a gifted student with no learning disability. Winebrenner (2003) states that the identification of the G/LD learner has been a source of confusion for

educators and parents for many years. What is most confusing for parents is the disconnect between the performance at home and at school for the child. At home the child may have conversations or enjoy hobbies that display a high level of thinking, but school performance is poor to average. One of the reasons for the dichotomy in performance is that although the G/LD learner closely resembles the gifted student in measures of intellectual ability, as measured on standardized tests (Nielsen, 2002), they often have difficulty in the areas of reading and writing that more closely resemble the learning disabled (LD) student.

G/LD students have areas of strengths and areas of weakness. This is reflected on standardized IQ tests where G/LD do not score high on the overall test because sub-test scores in weak areas pull the overall test scores down (McCoach, Kehle, Bray & Siegle, 2001; Nielsen, 2002; Winebrenner, 2003). Their results on the sub-tests of a standardized intelligence test are widely scattered.

A further complication is a phenomenon called masking (McCoach et al., 2001) where the disability of the learner makes them appear to be an average student when in reality they have superior abilities in certain areas that are never discovered. The superior abilities can also mask deficits that if undetected may lead to problems with basic skills not being mastered. As time goes on, the G/LD learners become more frustrated with their performance in the educational system and this leads to disruptive behaviour and disassociation. This general decline in performance over time may be a better indicator of G/LD than performance on an intelligence test.

The learning disability may also contribute to problems related to testing in general, such as test anxiety, or to those that are more specific. For example, poor reading skills or verbal

skills may lead to problems in sections of IQ tests where those skills are necessary. Both situations may mask a higher intelligence than is demonstrated by test results.

G/LD learners are often labelled with Attention Deficit, Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or be considered to have behavioural problems (Reis & McCoach, 2002). Educators then tend to focus on the behaviour problem rather than the characteristics of the giftedness that the G/LD learner possesses. Neihart (2000), in her paper that discusses misdiagnosis of gifted children, says many gifted learners are labelled ADHD because they have the common gifted characteristics of “intensity, sensitivity, impatience, and high motor activity” (p. 6). Neihart states that if the problem behaviours are situational and exist only at school but not at home, the child is probably not suffering from ADHD.

It is more important with the G/LD student to focus less on the “at-risk” behaviours and more on the G/LD student as “at-promise” (Nielsen, 2002, p. 93). Weinfield et al., (2003) focused their case study on a remedial program called the Wings Mentor Program, a part of Maryland’s Montgomery County Public School Accelerated and Enriched Instruction program that has worked with 600 students since 1989. They reported that the use of volunteer mentors to focus on the strengths and interests of G/LD learners is very beneficial. The participating students come away with a sense of success that led to increased self-esteem. The key to this program is providing the G/LD participants with an opportunity to demonstrate their strengths to others.

Programs like the Wings Mentor Program are not the norm and the G/LD student often becomes an underachiever. Many G/LD students experience underachievement in elementary and high school (Reis & McCoach, 2002). The G/LD student, if not identified, faces a school



career laden with frustration. They understand they are good at certain things but often these strengths go unrecognized because the focus is on their weaknesses. Underachievement of gifted students occurs for many reasons.

*Why do Academically Gifted Students Underachieve?*

Winebrenner (2001) suggests that those most able to learn, the gifted, actually learn the least in the conventional system. Winebrenner says gifted underachievers can best be understood if you realize they disconnect from teaching because they never get esteem-building experiences due to the fact they rarely have to work at something that is hard for them to master.

Physical impairments such as hearing and cerebral palsy (Reis & McCoach, 2002) can be barriers to achievement. It is important to remember that the student with the learning disability who is gifted may be passing and working at or very close to grade level. The student may appear average to the teacher but the learning disability is masking superior potential. They are underachieving; average for these individuals is not good enough.

Girls and students from low socio-economic backgrounds are special risk for underachieving when they are gifted learners (Stormont et al., 2001). Girls who are gifted are at particular risk of underachieving because in their own minds they do not fit the stereotypes. Girls who are more likely when gifted to underachieve, “have social and emotional problems, and feel isolated” (Stormont et al., p. 410). Stormont et al. suggest that girls that are academically gifted should be targeted for psychological counselling if necessary and should be offered career counselling early in school to help them reconcile their giftedness with stereotypes. If they have an idea where they are heading career-wise, they can focus on using their giftedness to perform at a high level to attain career goals.

“The poor are another group that seem to underachieve when gifted” (Stormont et al., p. 419). Often the identification of these students is difficult because of many issues associated with socioeconomic status, such as esteem, motivation in school, health etc., which are also barriers that prevent gifted characteristics from being displayed. Non-verbal intelligence tests and other methods of assessment are required to assess this group of students. Standard tests may not identify poor gifted students and they remain underperforming relative to their potential (Stormont et al.).

#### *Boredom and its Influence on Underachievement*

Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) conducted a qualitative case study of 10 academically gifted students, aged 15-18, who disengaged from the educational system. The authors determined that the 10 students in this study are examples of students that have become non-producers, not merely underachievers. Delisle (1992, as cited in Kanevsky & Keighley) differentiates between non-producers who are at risk academically but not psychologically and underachievers who are at risk academically and psychologically. The non-producers have chosen not to do the assigned work because they feel it is boring and irrelevant.

“Research findings suggest that a student does not have to be gifted to be bored in school but it helps” (Feldhusen & Kroll, 1991; Larson & Richards, 1991, as cited in Kanevsky & Keighley 2003). Kanevsky and Keighley argue that the most common cause of classroom boredom for gifted students is a lack of challenge and that this lack of challenge can lead to underachievement; the subtle twist in underachievement that Kanevsky and Keighley explore in their study is the aspect of non-producing students who disengage as a point of honor.

The 10 students in the study were not bored outside of school. Like the 871 gifted

students in a survey study conducted by Gallagher, Harradine, and Coleman (1997, as cited in Kanevsky and Keighley, 2003) who reported boredom associated with “copying, memorizing, regurgitating, repetition, waiting, and so on” (p. 23). The students in Kanevsky and Keighley’s research felt that they had little control over what they could do in school, little choice, very little challenge, and a lack of complexity in the material. The students reported a desire to study the issues they came across in more detail, without have to stop learning when a bell sounded and move on to another class. The students also had difficulty with the idea that attendance was compulsory. If they had to attend school on a regular basis, they felt that there was a duty on the part of the educational system to ensure that they were learning. Generally they felt that, despite their strong desire to learn, their needs were not met in school generally.

The negative feeling that the students who participated in this study had intensified as they moved through middle school and entered high school. Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) reported a decline in the student’s productivity and in their marks as they made their way through high school. The students resented the two common choices offered to them, more of the same work or tutor classmates that need help.

The research by Kanevsky and Keighley identified the role of a caring teacher as instrumental in the life of a gifted student. A caring teacher can balance the negative effects that are produced when students feel they have little control over a curriculum that does little to challenge them. A caring teacher can replace boredom with learning, which the authors say are mutually exclusive. The students in this study say “they were never bored when they were learning and they were never learning when they were bored” (p. 25).

*Strategies for Teaching Academically Gifted Students*

Gifted students, with or without learning disabilities, require specific strategies to facilitate their learning in school. An example of a specific strategy is compaction (Winebrenner, 2003) where students are encouraged to demonstrate mastery of a subject before it is taught and then skip the teaching of the mastered material. The time saved allows students to work on projects of their own choosing in which they have interest. Winebrenner recommends using a pre-test to assess prior learning before any new topic is introduced. Mastery of the material is demonstrated by a mark of 80% on the pre-test. Winebrenner argues that if a typical student receives a mark of 80% after instruction that is satisfactory, so why should the same mark before instruction not suffice. The key to compaction is the time saved by students because they are not getting the normal instruction is spent doing learning activities that appeal to them. In the case of academically gifted learners, the replacement activities satisfy their need for challenge and complexity.

### *Differentiation of Instruction*

Compaction leads to what Winebrenner (2003) calls differentiation, where not just the gifted, but all learners, should have the right to learn at their own pace and be taught according to their own needs. Tomlinson (1999) says that in the differentiated classroom “teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student’s road map for learning is identical to anyone else’s” (p. 9). Differentiated instruction leads to a differentiated classroom which is guided by a differentiated curriculum. Tomlinson admits that “it is difficult to achieve a differentiated classroom because we see few examples of them” (p. 10).

Jost (1997) believes that to think the full potential of an academically gifted student can be

realized in an inclusive classroom environment is “highly naive” (p. 267). Jost goes on to say “gifted students have a tremendous thirst for complexity, which requires additional materials and an accelerated rate of learning. They require differentiation in the curriculum and instruction so they can maximize their potential” (p. 267).

### *Ability Grouping*

Another way to differentiate the curriculum is to group by ability so that rather than try to deliver a broad curriculum in every class, you could offer a different curriculum in each class, a curriculum which might be somewhat narrower. A St. Louis, Missouri program called Programs for Exceptionally Gifted Students (PEGS), has run since 1992. There are approximately 50 students enrolled in the program which encompasses grades 1 to 12. The typical student does two years of elementary school in one year, does all of middle school in one year, and enters high school at age 12 (Sullivan & Rehorn, 2002). The PEGS program is a form of extreme differentiation. Students are grouped together loosely with their fellow academically gifted students, yet they are all on their own individual program. A student may be studying social studies and language arts at the middle school level, but be going to the high school for mathematical instruction.

Sullivan & Rehorn, (2002) say that “few children who score at the extreme top end of measures of intelligence can be appropriately educated in regular classrooms . . . or typical gifted education programs that only meet for a few hours each week . . . so most schools are ill-prepared to provide meaningful learning for these children” (p. 222). Gross, 1991, as cited in Sullivan & Rehorn maintain that the only hope for profoundly or exceptionally gifted students to find “intellectual and social companionship” (p. 272) is for them to be grouped by ability with

their peers.

Fiedler, Lange, and Winebrenner (2002) write in an issue of the Roeper Review that was devoted exclusively to ability grouping, that the anti-tracking movement has led to attacks on ability grouping, attacks that are based on myths. Tracking involves students being assigned to instructional groups based on perceived intellectual ability which is based on achievement tests and the observations that teachers made regarding students' performance (George, 1988, as cited in Fiedler et al., 2002).

One myth that Fiedler et al., (2002) attempt to dispel is that tracking and ability grouping are the same. Ability grouping involves the "re-grouping of students for the purpose of providing curriculum aimed at a common instructional level" ( p.109) as opposed to tracking where a student stays in a certain group permanently based on the criteria mentioned above.

Another myth Fiedler et al confront is that ability grouping is elitist; they argue it is actually the opposite. An academically gifted student is likely to develop an elitist attitude in a class that includes all abilities because they are never challenged and they always seem to know the right answer. However, in the gifted classroom, a student learns to "measure themselves with appropriate yardsticks" (p.110). The experience of studying with their academically gifted peers "might actually lower self-esteem somewhat" (Feldhusen & Saylor, 1990, as cited in Fiedler et al., 2002, p.110).

Fiedler et al., (2002) also argue that never do you hear that grouping the best athletes together for school sports teams is elitist, in fact schools celebrate their elite athletes' victories and support their development. A similar argument can be made for music programs which restrict entry based on talent and reward the best.

Oakes (1986, as cited in Rogers, 2002) argues that when the academically gifted are grouped based on ability minorities are left out. This is another myth and Fiedler et al., (2002) argue that poor identification procedures lead to the situations Oakes refers to. Ability grouping is not to blame, better identification procedures will see all populations represented fairly in gifted classrooms.

Yet another myth, according to Fiedler et al., (2002) is that gifted students will make it on their own and ability grouping has no effect on the educational outcomes of the academically gifted. Fiedler et al. argue that there is no supporting research for this position. Rogers (2002) agrees and reviewed 13 different studies involving ability grouping of some sort for the academically gifted. Using a statistical approach that produced a mean effect for each study in her meta-analysis, Rogers concluded that the academic, psychological, and socialization effects in all cases where academically gifted students were grouped together were significant and positive.

Fiedler et al., (2002) argue that a heterogeneously grouped classroom that uses cooperative learning is not effective in serving the needs of the gifted learner, they say it is yet another myth. Fiedler et al state that “without encounters with challenging material, gifted students fail to learn how to learn and have problems developing the study skills they need for future academic pursuits” (p.116). Arlin and Westbury (1976, as cited in Rogers, 2002) found that in cooperative learning situations involving teaching to the whole class the instructional pace was targeted towards the 23<sup>rd</sup> percentile, high-end achievers are held back for the benefit of low-end achievers. Rogers says there is no evidence that supports the idea of heterogeneous grouping being advantageous for any level of ability.

Willms (2000) does not agree with Rogers (2002), and after performing data analysis on the *National longitudinal Study of Children and Youth*, a longitudinal study that involved 22,000 students, and the *Third International Mathematics and Science Study*, and the *International Adult Literacy Study*, he says there are winners and losers. Willms concluded that ability grouping benefits those of higher socio-economic status the most; no matter what ability group they are placed in those of higher socio-economic status do better than their lower socio-economic peers of the same ability. Ability grouping disadvantages those that end up in the lower ability groupings. Willms found that at-risk students of the same ability would do significantly better when they were placed in high ability groupings. Willms suggests that one obvious reason that those in lower ability groupings do poorer than if they were placed in a higher ability group is that behaviour problems and learning problems are concentrated in the lower ability group. This slows the pace of learning which widens the gap between the high and low ability groups and the low ability groups were already behind to their peers to start.

Willms (2001) also worries about a situation he calls “double jeopardy” (p.58) where disadvantaged students from disadvantaged schools do even worse than disadvantaged students from schools that are not disadvantaged. Setting up gifted schools or charter schools, and special programs, sets up a situation, according to Willms, that makes some schools advantaged and others disadvantaged.

The last myth addressed by Fiedler et al., (2002) was that by grouping the academically gifted together you are removing them from other classrooms where they provide leadership. Fiedler et al. state that students model their behaviour on the behaviour of those with similar ability. Watching an academically gifted student solve yet another problem is not likely to



inspire a mid-level student; whereas another mid-level student's success will inspire them.

Fiedler et al. argue that equality in education should not mean we try to teach everyone the same thing, but that everyone should have an equal chance at fulfilling their potential.

Finally, a quote from Fiedler (1980, as cited in Fiedler et al., 2002), "when Bill (the gifted one) was in class, it was like the sun shining on a bright, clear day, but, when he went out to work with other gifted kids, it was like when the sun goes over the horizon. The rest of us were like the moon and the stars; that's when we finally got a chance to shine" (p. 112). This quote captures the experience of being a non-gifted student in a class with a gifted student.

#### *Research Involving the Attitudes of the Academically Gifted*

Gallagher (1997) surveyed 871 students that had been identified as being academically gifted in nine North Carolina school districts to determine their attitudes towards school. The students involved were in elementary, middle school, or high school. The nine school districts had recently been chosen to pilot new programs for academically gifted students. The programs for the academically gifted students mainly involved mathematics but there were some pull-out programs.

Only the mathematics programs and the special pull-out classes were seen as offering any challenge to the students surveyed. Half of the students reported that their language arts, science, social studies, the core subjects, were not challenging. The students enjoyed some classes and teachers "but all too often, they also reported boring, repetitive classrooms" (Gallagher, 1997, p.134). The strongest themes to emerge in Gallagher's research were waiting for other students to complete their work, having to go over work they already knew, being denied the opportunity to work ahead, and getting into trouble because they had too much free time.

A concern with academically gifted students is the impact of acceleration on the social or emotional life of a student. Rawlins (2003) did a qualitative case study of four mathematically gifted students high school in New Zealand that investigated their experiences with enrichment and acceleration. The students had all been accelerated until they reached their level of ability. Each of the students felt they benefited from the experience. Rawlins concludes “that undue stress will cause social or emotional harm in accelerated students, is not supported by the perceptions and experiences reported by participants in this project” (p. 49). However, Rawlins does not advocate acceleration over enrichment such as pull-outs, or special projects, he sees enrichment and acceleration as “legs supporting the same chair” (p. 51).

Another concern I have heard from my fellow teachers is that labelling a student as gifted will produce negative consequences for the student emotionally and socially. Feldhusen and Yun (1997) investigated the attitudes of 305 academically gifted students that were enrolled in a summer program for gifted students. The questionnaire that the students completed attempted to determine the students’ acceptance of the gifted label, how they view their abilities, how they felt about challenges, and the nature of their social relationships with students who were not in the gifted program. It is important to remember that the students in this research had voluntarily enrolled in a gifted program which might mean they “have stronger motivational characteristics” (p.17) than other academically gifted students.

Feldhusen and Yun (1997) found that the students in their study enjoyed a challenge and that the more they challenged themselves the more developed their academic abilities became. The more they challenged themselves the more comfortable they were with the label of gifted. The study also revealed that the older a student was the less likely they were to be comfortable

with the gifted label and that as they got older they were less likely to socialize with peers that were not identified as gifted.

*Parents' Attitudes on the Effect of an Enrichment Program for Gifted Students*

Olszewski-Kubilius and Lee (2004) conducted a study in which they surveyed 187 parents of students that attended a Saturday morning enrichment program for academically gifted students in order to determine if the parents felt the program increased the academic talents of their children. The enrichment program took place at the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University.

The major findings of the research were that parents supported the idea that the academically gifted students enjoyed the challenge an enriched course could offer. The parents felt the increased challenge led to more enjoyment of the subjects taught and a feeling that their children would be able to successfully complete in more academically rigorous courses in the future.

A large majority, 85.6%, of the parents surveyed indicated that challenging their children was the prime concern for enrolling their children in the program. However, the unique characteristics of the sample should be considered. Almost all, 98.6%, of the parents in this research had obtained at least a bachelor's degree, and a third held either a doctorate or professional degree. The sample of the parents is not representative of the general population.

Another interesting aspect of Olszewski-Kubilius and Lee's (2004) results indicated that approximately half of the students who participated in the Saturday Enrichment Program received more challenging work when they returned to normal school. However, the majority of the parents did not seek out educational enrichment opportunities even though they felt their

children benefited from them.

*Teaching the Gifted from the Perspective of the Regular Classroom Teacher*

Cashion and Sullenger (2002) suggest that the amount of time to put the latest theories into practise in the classroom is much longer than many would expect. Cashion and Sullenger tracked 50 Eastern Canadian teachers and administrators that had attended a four-week summer institute in gifted education in order to see how much of what the participants learned was put into practise.

The participants in the institute come from a largely rural area in Eastern Canada where gifted education is a “low educational priority” (Cashion & Sullenger, 2002, p.18). The participants in the institute completed a survey two years after the institute and 10 of the participants participated in phone interviews.

Overall there was an increase in the use of teaching practises learned at the institute as time went on. Strategies for individuals, things like curriculum compacting, mentors, and individual independent studies increased four-fold in year two over the first year after the institute. Whole class strategies which attempt to provide a differentiated curriculum doubled from the first year after the institute to the second year.

The teachers reported problems in using the strategies they learned at the institute due to lack of time, large class sizes, and feelings of isolation and a general fear that they could not deal with the complexity of running a classroom that could accommodate all learners including the academically gifted (Cashion & Sullenger 2002). The teachers felt they constantly had to sell their ideas regarding the teaching of the gifted as well as to lobby to maintain their positions, and this led to the feelings of isolation experienced by many of the teachers in the study.

### *The Direction of Future Research*

All of the literature that was reviewed was in agreement regarding the need for more research into all aspects of studying academically gifted students. Programs that assist gifted and G/LD learners will have to be reviewed and evaluated. McCoach et al. (2001) call for more empirical research to determine if there are different subsets of gifted and G/LD learners who would benefit from other strategies to improve their outcomes. Research is needed to develop programs that can assist educators to help G/LD students use their gifts to overcome their deficits (Nielsen, 2002, p.107).

This is a field of research where the possibilities are vast because gifted learners are a diverse group. There is a range among the academically gifted as well as the individuals that are G/LD. Any sub-group could be a subject for further research.

### *Interpretation and Discussion*

In no way did the previous summary provide an overall interpretation or understanding of the problems associated with being a gifted or G/LD learner at an in-depth level. The field of knowledge is simply too complex; not only are there all the concerns of the gifted learner to deal with, but a full review would require a study of all learning disabilities in combination with giftedness. A complete summary would possibly cover remediations for all possible combinations of learning strengths and learning deficits.

What this review does is provide a body of knowledge that is representative of the work that is being done in the field of giftedness today. This review has led me to the conclusion that any study performed at our school that focused on the experiences of gifted students would be of extreme value. A qualitative study will hopefully yield information that would be of benefit to

individuals who are gifted or G/LD.

Currently, there is not even recognition of gifted individuals in the PEI school system. I believe that gifted students are largely misunderstood. There are probably individuals in our system who are not identified, who are labouring under self-esteem issues, who are frustrated and who are not achieving the success they should be achieving given their gifted characteristics. Any attention to their experiences could only help raise awareness of their problems.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to explore the educational experiences of four gifted students in a school which is located in the Western School Board in Prince Edward Island. The information will be of benefit to the students themselves, but also to their parents and their teachers. For the students and their parents it provides a snapshot of what it is like to be a gifted learner from the viewpoint of others in a similar situation. More importantly this research can make educators aware of what is like to be a gifted learner in this particular educational jurisdiction. This research, which is centred around case studies of gifted students, will be a first step in helping some teachers guide the learning of students that are gifted. This chapter describes in detail the research design of this study, the justification of its use, and site selection. Data collection and analysis is described. Ethical considerations for this research are documented in this chapter as well.

#### *Research Design*

This research is designed as an exploration of the experiences of gifted students in the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island. The methodology used is a form of qualitative research known as the case study approach. Qualitative research can be very useful when you seek to understand a particular case in detail. Patton (2004) says “qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by

predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry” (p. 14). This is in contrast to quantitative inquiry that has other strengths, specifically as Patton states:

The advantage of a quantitative approach is that it’s possible to measure the reaction of a great many people to a limited set of questions, thus facilitating comparison and statistical aggregation of the data. This gives a broad, generalizable set of findings presented succinctly and parsimoniously. By contrast, qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This increases the depth of understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduces generalizability. (p. 14)

Merriam (1998) states that “the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive” and that “words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon” (p. 8). This is my goal, to research the experiences of the gifted students in this study in a way that provides deep insight into their everyday experiences in school.

My sample size is small, which is typical in qualitative research. Merriam suggests that “sample selection in qualitative research is usually (but not always) nonrandom, purposeful, and small, as opposed to the larger, more random sampling of quantitative research” (p.8). In consultation with my thesis supervisor it was decided that interviewing four students and their parents would provide the necessary data to support this qualitative research. In-depth dialogue with a small number of participants allowed the discussion to cover topics until I felt, as the researcher, I had reached the saturation point and no more could be learned from the participants. At this point I had as complete a picture or understanding of the phenomenon as possible.



In my research, I conducted interviews and collected data from four students and their parents. Each student was interviewed twice and the parents were interviewed once. The scope of my research is limited to the detailed experiences of a few individuals. This research might be a starting point for other research or give some insight to others about the experiences of gifted students. My research is exploratory in nature and is not a thorough study of the topic.

The strength of this research is that it allowed me to go wherever it was directed by the participants. I had a structured part of the interview to establish basic demographic and factual information, but there was an informal part of the interview that allowed for the exploration of any issue participants brought forth that was related to the experiences of the gifted student in the education system.

### *Site Selection*

This research was conducted in the province of Prince Edward Island, Canada. The population of Prince Edward Island in 2005 was 138,113. The province of Prince Edward Island has three school boards: the Western School Board, the Eastern School District, and the French Language School Board. My research was conducted in the Western School Board, where I work, making it practical to gather data.

I used my own intermediate school in selecting the informants. We have a student population of 650 students to draw upon. According to Renzulli (2002), a very conservative estimate would put approximately 1% of students into the gifted category based on their performance on a standardized intelligence test. I hypothesized that in any given year there should be enough gifted students in the school who would be ideal to use in a case study. According to Renzulli's estimate there should be at least six gifted students in the school.

### *Selection of Participants*

Ideally the students that participated in this research would not all be one gender. Even though a sample size of only four students does not lead to results that could be generalized to a larger population, differences based on gender might emerge. This research is exploratory in nature, and anything that emerged, such as differences based on gender, could be the launching point for further research.

The students that were selected for this research had to meet the criteria for being gifted learners. As discussed in my literature review, there are many definitions of giftedness. The definition that I settled on for selecting the participants in this research comes from the United States Department of Education (1993, as cited in Renzulli, 2002):

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavour. (p. 26)

The research design called for all participants to come from the same school if possible. In keeping with the definition of giftedness above, the gifted students should stand out amongst their peers. As the researcher, I was in a unique position in the school where I teach. I teach every student in the school and could canvass the other teachers in the school to assist in the selection of the outstanding students in the school. The selection process would have been more

difficult if students were selected from different schools because people would have to be found in each school who could help to in finding the individuals that were outstanding in their schools.

Students that had scored in the gifted range on standardized intelligence tests administered by psychologists were possible subjects. However, as I discussed in chapter two there are other models of multiple intelligences that can be used to determine intelligence, or giftedness.

Renzulli (2002) talks about gifted behaviours rather than gifted individuals, and states that gifted behaviour has three components:

Gifted behaviour consists of behaviours that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits-above-average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Individuals capable of developing gifted behaviour are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance (p. 69)

Considering the definition above and the theories of multiple intelligences discussed in Chapter two, I allowed a larger group of students to be considered beyond those who scored high on a standardized intelligence test. I also considered students who excelled on national tests such as the Pascal Math Competition, or who had written or performed in a way that demonstrated exceptional creativity.

I wanted the students who participated in this research to be outstanding in the following areas: mathematics, language arts, a second language, and music. As discussed in the literature review, there are many theories of intelligence. My goal was to select gifted students that possessed outstanding intelligence in as many areas as possible. Because my sample size was

small, four participants, all-around gifted students would hopefully give me a good overview of the experiences of a gifted students in our educational system. To achieve this, I canvassed individual teachers at the school where the research was done. The teachers were asked to provide the names of the students they considered to be the most gifted or outstanding students that they currently taught or had taught and were still in the school. Mathematics, language arts, and French teachers were consulted and asked to make selections as to who they felt were outstanding or gifted students. The list that was generated after consulting with the math, language arts and French teachers was then checked by the music teacher. The list was reduced to four students, two females and two males, each of whom was categorized as being gifted or outstanding by all the teachers that had taught them.

I then checked the academic records of each of the students going back to Grade One. Each of the students was described as outstanding or extremely talented during his or her entire education.

The guidance counsellor then took the list of four students who met all the criteria and agreed to make the first contact with their parents. The guidance counsellor explained to the parents the nature of the research and that at least one of the parents of each student would be interviewed in addition to the two student interviews.

All the students and their respective parents agreed to participate in the research after being contacted by the guidance counsellor. At this point, I made contact with the parents and made arrangements for the interviews that would follow.

### *Participants*

Each of the participants chosen was an outstanding student in every subject, including

mathematics, music, language arts, and French. None of the participants had any learning problems of any kind. Each of the participants had well-developed verbal skills and were very easy to talk to. There was a male and a female from both Grade 8 and Grade 9. A detailed description of the individual participants is given in Chapter Four.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data for this research were collected from a series of interviews. Permission was obtained from the Research Ethics Board of the University of Prince Edward Island prior to any contact being made with the participants and their parents. Once approval was obtained permission was requested from the superintendent of the Western School Board (See Appendix A) and the principal (See Appendix B) of the school in which the research was conducted.

All of the interviewees were fully aware that the interviews were being audio recorded. An information letter (See Appendix C) which outlined the nature of the research was approved by the Research Ethics Board and given to the participants and their parents. Consent forms were read and signed by all participants (Appendix D & E) before any interviewing was undertaken.

All of the audio recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions were checked by another researcher to ensure accuracy. The transcriptions were then coded and analysed so that themes common to all the participants would be apparent. The thematic coding was checked by my thesis supervisor.

The participants all understood that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at anytime. In all instances, I stated that anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Before the participants were asked any questions the selection

criteria were shared with them (See Appendix F).

### *The Interview Process*

All interviews were conducted in a comfortable location agreed upon with the participants. Each of the participants was interviewed twice. The interviews were between 30 and 50 minutes in. The first interview sought to explore the participants' thoughts on what being gifted meant, if they thought they were gifted, how well they liked school, what they did not like about school, how they were taught, their social life in school, and what they thought might improve their educational experiences. Probing follow-up questions were asked when more detail was required from a participant.

The second round of interviews explored themes that emerged in the first set of interviews, such as what made school so enjoyable overall, the lack of challenge they encountered in school, the fact there was no formal identification of gifted students, and the lack of differentiation in instruction.

After the participants had all been interviewed twice, a parent of each student was then interviewed. The interviews with the parents focussed on the themes that had emerged while interviewing their children. Additional background was obtained from the parents relating to the educational experiences of their child from the time the child started school.

All interviews were done in a site that was agreeable to each participant. An effort was made to ensure that interview sites were comfortable and afforded a relaxed atmosphere. Privacy concerns were also considered when picking the interview locations.

The interviews were audio-taped with the participants' approvals. Notes were made by the researcher on non-verbal behaviours of the participants that were observed and considered

meaningful. The tapes were transcribed and given to the respective participants to ensure that they were accurate. Once the transcriptions had been checked by the participants they were edited according to the wishes of the participants. Participants could add comments when they edited the transcripts or have material deleted in order to more clearly reflect what they meant to say.

The collected data were analysed by coding the transcripts according to themes that were repeated. The interview transcriptions of the parents and their children produced common themes. The coded transcriptions were then checked by my thesis supervisor to ensure that the coding was accurate. Having the thematically coded data checked by someone else allowed the researcher to assess the inter-rater reliability. This test of inter-rater reliability ensured that the coding was accurate.

### *Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness of the research is based on the nature of the data collection method. Patton (2002) states that “the trustworthiness of the data is tied directly to the trustworthiness of the person who collects and analyses the data-- and his or her demonstrated competence. Competence is demonstrated by using the verification and validation procedures necessary to establish the quality of analysis and thereby building a ‘track record’ of quality work” (p. 570). Maintaining a researcher’s log, audio-taping of the interviews, transcription of the interviews, member-checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail were used in this research to ensure that the data was trustworthy.

The researcher’s log was kept to record the progress of the study. Details relating to the planning of the research and the rationale behind the research could be checked by referring to

this log. The research log also allowed the researcher to reflect on any biases the might have influenced the research. The research's log is part of process that makes the research more reliable as memory alone was not used to recall information relating to the formation of the research project.

The audio-taping of the interviews with the permission of the participants ensures that there is a permanent and accurate record of the interviews. Participants were given an outline before any interviews were conducted of questions that would be asked and the overall direction of the research. Member-checking of the data meant that participants were then given a summary of the interview along with a transcription that they could edit. The participants were told that they could add comments at this time or omit anything that they did not want to appear in the final transcript. This process ensured that the participants agreed the data were an accurate record of the interview.

Throughout the research process the researcher met with his thesis supervisor. This peer-debriefing allowed time for monitoring the development of the research plan. Any emerging bias on the part of the researcher was discussed while meeting with the thesis supervisor.

An audit trail was maintained by safely storing in a locked file cabinet all interview tapes, transcriptions of those tapes, and the abstracts and articles used to write this dissertation. The audio-tapes and the corresponding transcriptions will be destroyed two years after the defence of this thesis.

### *Ethical considerations*

As mentioned earlier, prior to research being conducted this research received ethical approval from the Ethics Review Board of the University of Prince Edward Island. Permission



was also granted from the Western School Board before approaching the principal of the school where the research would be conducted. Permission was obtained from the principal of the school where the research was conducted. Participants signed consent forms giving their permission to participate in this research and were fully briefed about the nature of the research including the fact that they could end their participation at anytime. Participants were given a realistic estimate of how much time would be required on their part. Participants were also informed that the discussions would be limited to educational experiences. All participants were given the opportunity to refuse to be audio-taped. Participants were reminded that they could refuse to answer any question. When the interview process was completed the researcher included a debriefing session with each participant that allowed them to comment on how they perceived the experience of being interviewed. They could suggest changes at this point. The researcher made sure that the identities of the participants was kept completely confidential by using pseudonyms and using private locations for the interviews. No references are given anywhere that could threaten the anonymity of the participants. The rights of the participants in this research to confidentiality and anonymity were protected at all times.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

I began teaching in the public school system in Prince Edward Island about the time my first child started school. I have always had a keen interest in the way education works as an organization. Most of my experience, prior to entering the teaching profession, has been in the private sector. The goal in most of my jobs was to produce something, and make as much money as possible, while providing a quality service. This called for constant reflection on what I was doing and where I was heading. The need for reflection did not end when I started teaching.

As my own children began their journey through the educational system, I would constantly reflect on how their unique needs were being met. My children found school easy and always did well according to all reports and interviews. One child did so well that it became an issue. She was reading well above grade level, finishing all her work much sooner than the rest of the class, so much faster that it became a problem. The child was bored and the teacher seemed to reluctant to meet her needs.

We eventually decided to send this child to a private school which she found more enjoyable and challenging. The work was much harder at this school and the expectations were much higher.

When I started teaching, I reflected on what it would be like to have one of my children in my classroom. I didn't really see how I could do something substantially different than that of the teacher who was challenged to meet the needs of my child. I have never had time in my own classroom to offer a separate program for students who are much further ahead academically and

intellectually than their peers.

During my Master of Education program, when asked to consider potential research topics, I gravitated towards the problems encountered by students who are gifted, students who stand out amongst their peers no matter what assessment method is chosen. I found very little information on studies of gifted children in Prince Edward Island other than a paper titled *An Oral History of Gifted Education in Prince Edward Island* (Timmon & Wood, 2000). I did not discover any formal programs for gifted children although I did hear about programs that in the past individual teachers had devised to challenge students of superior abilities.

My previous experience with research had been strictly quantitative. I was very comfortable with the concept of statistical analysis and thought this is where I would be headed in my research. However, after learning about qualitative research and how it could be applied to explore a topic using the case study approach, I thought this framework would work well in studying the experiences of gifted students.

### *The Research*

This research is qualitative, specifically, it is exploratory research that uses a case study approach.

A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case. The single leaf, even a single toothpick, has unique complexities-but rarely will we care enough to submit it to case study. We study a case when it itself is of special interest. We look for the detail of interaction with its context. Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. (Stake, 1995, as cited in Patton, 2004, p. 297)

This is exactly what I am after in this research, using a small number of individuals to study in detail a particular circumstance; the particular circumstance being a few gifted students in the educational system in Prince Edward Island.

Hopefully this research will act as a springboard for further research that would be directed towards the needs of the gifted learner.

### *The Researcher*

My teaching career in the educational system has spanned less than a decade, but I have taught since summer camp days. I have instructed white-water canoeing, wilderness skills, log-building, and carpentry. I have taught karate to six year-olds and energy efficient building to builders 20 years my senior. I have worked with juvenile delinquents who did not want to be where they were. I have always loved working with people no matter what their situation. I enjoy watching people improve their lives and it a joy to be able to assist them in their journey.

I have a natural ability to connect with people and have them talk about their lives. Within minutes of meeting someone on a train or in a line-up, people will tell me the most extraordinary, and often intimate, things about their lives. I think this happens because they know I care about them and am interested in what they have to say.

When I learned about qualitative research and the case study approach, it struck me as a method of research that dove-tailed nicely with my natural abilities. I had no doubts that I would be able to communicate easily and comfortably with the students in this research as well as their parents. Conducting this investigation was enjoyable and more social, like meeting new friends than conducting a data-gathering exercise.

I am confident that participants felt they were able to share with me any information that

was relevant to their educational experiences.

### *The Participants*

What follows is a brief description of the four students who took part in my research. All participants' names in this study are pseudonyms used to protect their confidentiality.

Three of the students, Dale, Glenda, and Wayne are in a French Immersion program. The school also has an English program. Approximately three-quarters of the school population is in the English program. The one participant that is not in the French Immersions program, Fiona, is in Grade 8 in the English program.

All of the participants are pleasant, well-spoken, mature young people. Even though they excel at virtually everything they do, they are in no way arrogant or conceited. They do not seem to have any need to demonstrate to others how exceptional they are.

The participants were fun to talk with throughout the course of the research. They all have what I would call a well developed sense of humour and were not in anyway intimidated by the interview process. Laughter was a regular occurrence during the interviews. The excerpts below typify the relaxed nature of the dialogue.

*Researcher:* What do you like about school the best?

Wayne: Besides going home?

*Researcher:* Describe a time when you found school easy?

Glenda: [Laughter] Does 99.9% of the time count?

*Researcher:* Tell me about a time when you have the most fun at school

Dale: Lunch. Just going places with my friends. After lunch it would be going home.

*Researcher:* What question would you ask a gifted student if you could only ask them one thing?

Wayne: [Long pause] Um... I would ask... I would ask them... "What did you have for lunch?"

I used the style above throughout the presentation of interview findings to show the extent to which the interviews themselves were conversations with student participants. My intention was to give the reader a sense of what it was like during the interviews themselves.

Glenda was the most talkative participant followed closely by Wayne. Perhaps the fact that Wayne and Glenda are both in Grade 9, Dale and Fiona are both in Grade 8, may explain at least in part why Wayne and Glenda felt more comfortable to talk more freely. Glenda is exceptionally mature for her age, so much so that it is easy to forget that you are talking to someone who is in Grade 9. Glenda is very well read, as are all the participants, and is actually working on writing her own book at the present time. Glenda, like the other participants, has a huge range of interests and friends, including a best friend who she communicates with mostly via the internet, but also talks to on the telephone on a regular basis. Her friend lives far enough away that they have never met in person. Glenda is active in school life: drama, working in the library, and band are all favourite activities. Her school career has included many solo vocal and instrumental performances in front of the whole school. She is always surrounded by a core of friends when I see her in the hall. This is not to say she likes everyone or that everyone likes her. She does not make the effort to be friendly with everyone, there are people that she dislikes intensely. Largely, she avoids those with whom she does not care to engage.

Glenda and the other participants struck me as being very self-assured. They did not seem to have any worries about the future. Glenda even knew that she would like to pursue a career in the field of forensic science.

Wayne is absolutely bursting with confidence in a way that is not apparent until you enter

a lengthy conversation with him. He is not boastful or full of himself, he is just supremely confident in everything he does. Wayne would not describe himself as a great athlete, however, he also excels in gym class. Everything comes easy to Wayne, much like the other participants. He sheepishly admitted to me, unsure if he should say such a thing to a teacher, that he has never studied for a thing in his life. He would occasionally look at a vocabulary list before a French test, that is the limit of his studying. This was confirmed by his parents who say that they originally limited his extracurricular activities to two per week, but Wayne managed things so well he now is into many more activities than this and handles everything well and with time to spare.

Wayne, like Glenda, knows exactly what career he wants to pursue. He wants to be a pilot and has taken steps towards this goal already. He is very realistic about his goals and will be happy anywhere in the aviation field that will allow him to fly a plane.

Wayne is perhaps the funniest of the participants and can often be seen in the halls regaling a teacher with some of his jokes. He can always be counted on to lighten the atmosphere with humour.

Fiona who is the quietest of the participants, but also very competent at expressing herself. Like Glenda she loves to write stories. She is the only one of the participants that is not exactly sure about what she will do in the future. She is also the participant who least understands how extraordinary her talents are in school. For example, she knows that the music teacher shows her something difficult once and she just gets it, but doesn't realize that it doesn't work that way for most people. She doesn't see herself as being gifted or outstanding the way the other participants do.

Dale is a quiet, determined young man who excels not only academically and musically, but is a stand-out athlete in every sport he plays. None of this has gone to his head in anyway according to his parents. He is fully aware of his talents but would never boast or gloat about his accomplishments. He is also a very sensitive young man who is concerned about the welfare of others. Like Glenda and Wayne, he already knows what he wants to do, probably a career in medicine, and knows what he has to do to accomplish this. Despite how well Dale does in school, the most important thing in his life is his social time. This was confirmed by his parents. He has had a fairly large group of friends since grade one and he is loyal to them, as they are to him. His favourite school activity is lunch.

### *Emergent Themes*

After coding the data set that was collected during the first interviews, several themes emerged. These themes were validated by my thesis supervisor and the participants, and became starting point for developing questions that would form the core of the second round of interviews.

The themes that were derived from the first two sets of interviews were explored with the parents of the students in a third round of interviews along with background information about their children and any other issues they cared to raise.

### *Enjoyment of School*

A theme that became apparent almost immediately was how happy the participants in my research project were. They seemed to be content with all the aspects of their lives that were discussed. They also seemed to enjoy their school experiences. This is not to say that they enjoyed every aspect of school. There are teachers that they do not like, they are often bored,



they all wish that they were challenged more often, there are other students that annoy them, but overall they all share an enthusiasm for school. It is not so much what goes on in the academic setting, the classroom is not what these students find so appealing, it is everything else that surrounds the classroom setting that they find so enjoyable.

They are all involved in activities that bracket the school day. The one common experience they share is involvement with the band program. All four of the participants state that band at school is a very important dimension of their lives and they would miss it greatly if it was removed as a choice.

*Researcher:* Tell me about when you have the most fun at school.

Fiona: Whenever I'm in band, because it is practising and playing music, and I like lunch, or recess because that is when me and my friends or whatever go to the park and play around.

*Researcher:* What is it about band that makes it so much fun?

Fiona: I just like playing music, and learning it and stuff.

*Researcher:* How does band influence your enjoyment of school?

Fiona: Well, I like playing the music, and practising at home, and the trips we go on.

*Researcher:* How would you feel if the band program ended?

Fiona: I would be disappointed because it is one of my favourite classes.

Glenda made similar comments to Fiona's regarding the band program. It is not her most favourite activity at school, but it is a close second.

*Researcher:* What about band?

Glenda: Oh that is really fun especially all the trip and the things we get to do.

*Researcher:* Does it come close to drama?

Glenda: Pretty darn close.

*Researcher:* How does band influence your enjoyment of school?

Glenda: The other students are pretty good, a lot of them are funny.

*Researcher:* How would you feel if the band program ended?

Glenda: That would not go over well. Within five minutes I would have an entire student population strike. I am not letting that program die!

Dale's feelings about band closely mirror those of Fiona's. For Dale the most fun in school revolves around his social life. Band is an extension of his social life.

*Researcher:* Tell me about when you have the most fun at school

Dale: Lunch. Just going places with my friends. After lunch it would be going home.

*Researcher:* How does band influence your enjoyment of school?

Dale: It is a lot of fun, you get to miss some classes and go on the band trip.

*Researcher:* How would you feel if the band program ended?

Dale: Disappointed, school wouldn't be as much fun.

Three of the participants, Glenda, Dale, and Wayne, are involved heavily in extracurricular activities at school in addition to band. They all are extremely passionate about their enjoyment of their extracurricular activities.

*Researcher:* How do you find school?

Glenda: Oh, it's awesome, I mean it's better than staying at home all day because I'd have to do stuff on the computer and you can only take that for so long.

*Researcher:* What do you like the best?

Glenda: All the stuff that you can do, I'm in timers and scorers, I'm in drama and library stuff

and all that, oh definitely the library, couldn't live without it. Because I hardly ever manage to get to the public ones, so I would pretty much be bored to death.

*Researcher:* Tell me about when you have the most fun at school.

Glenda: That would be in drama. It is funny when people improvise with random comments. We are doing a play now and I can't help but notice irregular things in the plot.

Apart from band, Fiona has a more limited extracurricular life, the most limited of the four participants, but it is the extras in school that she finds the most fun.

*Researcher:* How do you find school?

Fiona: Good, easy, fun to go to, I find it [pause]...really easy and mostly fun.

*Researcher:* What do like the best?

Fiona: I like band, and English.

*Researcher:* Why is English so good?

Fiona: I like to write stories and stuff.

*Researcher:* Do they let you write a lot of stories

Fiona: Yes.

*Researcher:* Why do you like band so much?

Fiona: I really like music and trying to play new stuff.

Having fun is an important aspect of their school lives for the participants. All of the participants seem to have a large capacity for happiness. They smile a lot, and laugh often.

*Researcher:* What has been your favourite year in school so far? Why?

Fiona: Probably Grade 5, it was fun and easy and I had a really good teacher.

*Researcher:* Imagine a new student is starting at your school. The new student is similar in

ability to yourself. What would you say to them about what they should expect from his or her school experience.

Fiona: It will basically be easy and fun.

Glenda responds to the question above much the same as Fiona. She feels that a student like herself coming to the school will really enjoy it.

Glenda: It's going to be awesome, and I would tell them that I would help them out if they need emotional support or help with anything. I mean, I wouldn't just leave them high and dry or anything.

*Researcher:* So, they would enjoy it?

Glenda: Yeah, they're going to love it.

The most negative comments about school come from Wayne. Wayne is a very deep thinker who will often take a considerable period of time to frame a response and then come up with something fairly profound. The response below is from Wayne's first interview.

*Researcher:* What do you like best about school?

Wayne: Besides going home?

*Researcher:* Yes. Besides going home.

Wayne: Um... well, usually Math class is good um... Gym is usually fine, except this term, because it's first aid, I like band, um... French class is ok, it's better than it was first term, or first year; Social Studies has improved dramatically, because of a certain teacher, which I'm not going to name, um... language arts is usually fairly good too because until recently we read about 10 or 15 every class, and I like reading.

The following is from the second interview with Wayne. I was expanding on the theme

of enjoyment in school that had developed in the first round of interviews.

*Researcher:* Tell me about when you have the most fun at school.

Wayne: School is easy, I just don't like it.

*Researcher:* You don't like it at all?

Wayne: I like some parts of school, but I'd rather be home sleeping or reading.

*Researcher:* Most of the time?

Wayne: Well some classes I like.

*Researcher:* So you wouldn't describe school as fun generally?

Wayne: To me not quite, I like band, home ec., math, and L.A.. I like being in French Immersion, I just don't like the teachers.

*Researcher:* So most of the time it is fun?

Wayne: Yeah.

*Researcher:* How does band influence your enjoyment of school?

Wayne: I really like band, it is a lot of fun, even when your lips go numb and I do like being in the honour band program because I've met a lot of new people from across the Island.

*Researcher:* How would you feel if the band program ended?

Wayne: Probably even worse because the band program is really fun.

Wayne is the most unique of the four participants in terms of his enjoyment of school. His enjoyment of school is a strictly qualified. Even his reason for enjoying band so much does not focus on the trips and the social life.

*Researcher:* What is it about band that makes it so much fun for you?

Wayne: Whenever everyone knows their parts really well, and they play at the right time, it

sounds pretty neat to have 40 or 50 instruments playing and making good music.

The participants were asked how their enjoyment of school could be increased and there were areas of commonality among them. Wayne and Dale would like to see flying added. Fiona and Dale would like to see art added. Wayne and Glenda would like to see something added relative to their clearly defined career goals.

*Researcher:* What other classes or programs could be added to increase your enjoyment of school?

Wayne: Something like navigation, or aerodynamics, something to do with flying.

Dale: Mmmm...An art class maybe. Maybe flying.

Fiona: Maybe art classes because I really like that. Nothing else that I can think of right now.

Glenda: Something to do with either riddles or archery. Maybe a forensic science course.

#### *Parents of the Participants*

The parents of the students in this research were as interesting as the students themselves. Again, what struck me most was how much fun they seemed to be having and the amount of laughter and humour that accompanied the interview process. They were an easy group to question about their children's school experiences.

Most of the parents had performed well in school. Fiona's parent had been in a program for exceptional students in another province. Dale's parent had skipped a grade as had one of Glenda's parents. Wayne's parents had a scientific background.

At no time did I find a contradiction between what the parents and their respective children said.

#### *Enjoyment of School; the Parents' Perspective*

The parents validated what their respective children said about their enjoyment of school.

Glenda really enjoys school because of the extracurricular activities. Fiona enjoys school, but is generally really easy to please, so much so that her parent says “she is a pleaser, to a fault.”

Dale’s enjoyment of school is in the social life. Wayne enjoys some of the challenges that school affords, but generally is going to deal successfully with any situation that comes his way.

*Researcher:* Tell me about how much fun she has at this school.

Glenda’s parent: She has fun at school, she is in to so much, she has enjoyed it. You don’t hear any complaints.

*Researcher:* How does band influence her enjoyment of school?

Glenda’s parent: She likes band, there is no problem getting her up in the morning to go, she procrastinates with her practising.

*Researcher:* How would you feel if the band program ended?

Glenda’s parent: I would be very disappointed, she really likes band.

Dale’s Dad and Fiona’s mother expressed views similar to Glenda’s parents in regards to the band program, they all indicated their children really enjoyed it. Dale is quite a reserved young man who according to his parent uses band as an artistic outlet.

Dale’s ad described his experience with band as follows:

He does like band, he enjoys it, it is funny watching him at concerts, he gets right into it.

It is completely different from the school and the sports, it is musical, it is artistic. Some people are shy about expressing their feelings in public, I think this is where his feelings come out. If they are playing he is the first guy swinging his arms having a great time.

The music program does add to his enjoyment of school.

Wayne's parent had a slightly different view. Wayne's parents felt that he enjoyed band but that he would not miss it if he had not had it.

### *Lack of Challenge and Boredom*

One of the striking themes to emerge from my investigation was the lack of challenge for the four student interviewed. The participants in this research have rarely been challenged, if ever, in the regular classroom setting. This theme is repeated many times in the discussions that I had with the students and their parents. In most cases the lack of challenge is accepted; however, in the case of Dale's parent, it is a frustration that had been present in the education of all of Dale's siblings.

All of the parents raise the issue of a lack of challenge and that their children are bored much of the time. The three students, Glenda, Wayne, and Dale, who are in French Immersion, were placed in that program largely to challenge them. Although French Immersion has helped challenge their children, all the parents suggest something else could be done to challenge their children more.

The students all realize that they are not challenged, they all state that they find school easy. They all state that fundamentally they have never been challenged in the classroom setting. All the participants would like to be challenged, they all wish they had access to harder work.

*Researcher:* Describe a time when you found school easy.

Wayne: About half, at least half my tests. If I . . . [awkward pause] I'm not sure if I should say this or not, but half the time I don't even study. I don't know if I've ever studied.

*Researcher:* You've never studied?

Wayne: I don't think so. Except maybe I'd glance at the words for a vocabulary test, but not



usually. Almost never.

*Researcher:* Describe a time when you found school easy.

Fiona: I find math class and the stuff we are doing easy.

*Researcher:* Could you start the questions before anything is taught?

Fiona: Yes, because a lot of the stuff we did last year.

There is no delay or doubt when the participants are asked about the amount of time they are subjected to challenging work. They are virtually never challenged.

*Researcher:* When asked how often do they find school easy, all four students responded “most of the time.”

Dale: Most of the time

Glenda: Same as before. Most of the time.

Wayne: Most of the time.

Again, it is not that work is just easy for these students, it is important to realize that they are saying that they have never been challenged in any way. They are moving through the scholastic part of the educational system with very little effort.

*Researcher:* Have you ever come across too big a challenge for you to complete in your schooling so far?

Dale: Not that I can remember

*Researcher:* Have you ever run into anything that you couldn't do?

Fiona: No, not really never.

*Researcher:* Could you go for harder stuff in French and music?

Fiona: Yes, sometimes in music I find the sheets too easy.

*Researcher:* Do you get bored with them when they are too easy?

Fiona: Yes, sometimes when I'm practising, I don't really want to play them that many times.

What is interesting with Fiona is that even though she finds the music, or the math, or whatever the subject she is working in easy, she will still do the practise or the work. Her mother calls her a pleaser, almost to a fault. Even though she gets everything the first time in music, according to her music teacher, she will still do the practise even when it is boring. Wayne, however, does very little work, according to his parents, Wayne admits this in the interviews. When asked what gifted means, part of his reply was "just smart but you don't do any work.."

These students say that they would love to find a challenge in the classroom similar to challenges they seek outside of the classroom.

*Researcher:* How would you feel if a task in school was challenging?

Glenda: I would love it! You hardly ever get a decent challenge anymore so whatever I can get I am willing to do.

*Researcher:* What would you like to change about your education?

Fiona: Just more challenging work.

Dale: That it challenges me a bit more.

Both Glenda and Wayne acknowledge the inherent challenge of learning another language. Glenda says that the hardest thing in school that she encounters is French grammar. The French is a challenge, but not so great that it presents difficulties for them. Glenda and Wayne are both the top students in French Immersion at their school.

*Researcher:* Is French Immersion (FI) a factor in your enjoyment of school?

Glenda: Yes, because it is a challenge, my mom told me that the only reason I am in FI in the

first place is that, when it came time for kindergarten, I already knew everything that they could have taught me. So they put me in FI so that I could learn something.

*Researcher:* How would you feel about French Immersion ending?

Wayne: I wouldn't be very happy about it because even though I don't like the teacher I do like being in French, it is more challenging because a bunch of people who were in French Immersion [and are now in the English stream] had their marks go up quite a bit, especially in French class even if their French was not that good.

*Lack of Challenge in School; the Parents' Concerns*

The participants accept the lack of challenge to varying degrees. Wayne is the most concerned about the lack of challenge, Fiona is probably the least concerned. Glenda and Dale are somewhere in between. The parents are also concerned about the lack of challenge to varying degrees. Dale's parent is the most concerned about the lack of challenge and feels that Dale will encounter problems similar to what his other children experienced as a result of boredom and a lack of challenge in the school system. He feels that the system caters to the average student and the student with learning difficulties quite well, but fails the academically superior students.

When asked how has the educational system served you so far, Dale's dad said the following:

I don't think that it has really done a good job, this is not a reflection on the teachers, it is a reflection on the curriculum that they use on children like my child and the time they have to spend on them, children that have a stronger academic ability. The French Immersion (FI) Program helps some, just to learn another language is a challenge. They have to do something to challenge a child like this. Truly challenging students like this,

or any of my kids it [the educational system] just hasn't done it. To the point where a frustration level starts to come up, and almost a placidity, especially with my older children where in high school they just don't find a challenge. I am worried for my son that he also might get bored, not see the relevance to it. They don't present the information, and I don't mean to be unfair, the information is presented at a level that they get bored with and find trivial. It doesn't excite them. I saw with my oldest child and when she went to McGill she was a year behind yet she was in the top ten percent at her high school. This is confirmed if you talk to any of the other parents. If they go to UPEI they are bored with it but when they go to schools that have the top students from other jurisdictions, they can't compete.

Wayne's parents are probably the most accepting of the lack of challenge in the system and would not want any changes introduced that add more structure to Wayne's life. When asked how has their educational system served your child so far, Wayne's mom replied: Adequately. It has not failed him in anyway. We don't have any ambitions to see him challenged, although that would have come in handy in the first few grades. Beyond that there has been enough variety. As long as he can read, then he is happy. The teachers accommodate him and let him read. He is doing very well now, in part because of all the outside the classroom activities in which he participates.

When asked if he was disappointed by the lack of challenge, Wayne's mom continued: I think the variety of programs offered in this school helps compensate for the lack of academic challenge. He keeps himself so busy with extra-curricular tasks that he has learned time management. We have, in the past, forced him to go to his extra-curricular activity even though

he would have preferred not to so he could complete other work. This has helped build his time management skills.

Fiona's mother has experienced this lack of challenge with her other children and as an exceptional student herself. Although she would like to see her child challenged more, she is wary about programs for exceptional students such as the one she participated in as a child. She states that gifted programs have advantages and disadvantages. She wishes something could be done. Her main concern is that Fiona will get bored and lose interest in education. In her own words:

I don't blame the educational system, but I think my kids find it boring most of the time. They are not challenged enough. Now this year there are the projects. One of my children, a boy just gave up. I know they have to deal with so many kids, I don't like the size of the classroom, I think that is bad, I don't like it when they cut programs, that is bad, especially anything to do with music or art, those are really great outlets for them. I just find they get bored. I can get them to high school, but then they seem to turn on me, they are so bored by that point. The older girl has been in sports all the way up and that helps. I am so happy the band program is here. If she didn't have that she [Fiona] would be bored too.

When asked for a final comment Fiona's mom said: I understand that the teachers have to bring everyone along at the same pace, but the ones that can do extra, it is just not there for them.

Glenda's mother is also concerned that because her daughter has never been challenged in school. Glenda has never developed study or work habits because everything came so easily to her, so she worries Glenda will have a difficult time in university when she encounters hard work

for the first time. Generally, Glenda's mother is happy with how the academic side of school has gone for Glenda, her primary concern has been the social aspect of school. She states that Glenda has been given enough extras, such as puzzles, time to work on her own, and extra mathematics, that they haven't left her behind.

When asked if she would like to see her daughter challenged more, Glenda's mother replied:

I am happy with her academics, yet I was hoping that there would have been a change, in terms of her being challenged, from elementary to middle school. There hasn't been. Hopefully there will be a change in high school. The problem is that she does not have any study habits and she will need those for university.

### *Differentiation of Instruction*

The participants in this research generally excel at everything they do. Their level of performance does not change how teachers instruct them. The student participants did not report any difference in the type of instruction they received in comparison to their classmates. They all reported that they rarely interact with teachers on an individual basis because they do not require any help from them. All of the participants easily comprehend the tasks that are given to the class as a whole and they just go about their work finishing it quickly and easily.

The students suggested that a change in instruction, specifically offering them harder work to do, would make school more interesting for them. When asked what would make a subject more interesting for students like herself, Fiona replied "if the student is finished the work, give them harder work to do. They should have some harder work ready for those students." Fiona feels she would learn a lot more if the work was harder. Fiona would like to be

given “longer books and harder books.”

Glenda suggested something similar when asked what would make school more interesting, “for math I would probably let the student work ahead on material. I would let the student work at their own pace and if they want to finish the entire math book, well there is plenty of other stuff they can do. I might try to get on to something that is a higher level. So in L.A. I would see if I could get them a textbook based on adult levels.”

Dale would also like to see more challenge in class, in the form of more challenging questions as well as classes that were grouped by ability. He thinks that grouping by ability could benefit all students. He would like to try a class where all the students were of similar ability to himself.

Wayne would also like to see more challenge in his classes. When asked what would make it more challenging for him he replied, “make it more difficult, or a class of just those particular people (of higher ability) so that there wouldn’t be any dumb questions, and the teacher would not have to explain it as much, or work that is harder.”

All of the participants suggested that, if given the option, they would go for harder and more difficult work. Glenda’s opinion on differentiation of instruction was typical of the participants’ opinions, “I think it would be awesome because you could figure out what your limits are and really test yourself. And the challenge is always fun”.

### *Differentiation of Instruction: the Parents’ Varied Frustration Levels*

The parents interviewed all realize that their children are not challenged in the classroom and that there is no differentiation of instruction. The frustration levels of the parents due to a

lack of differentiation of instruction varies. Wayne's parents are the most accepting of the fact that there is not a challenge in the regular classroom for their child. Fiona's mom and Dale's dad have had other children go through the educational system and are more frustrated because they saw their other children become disengaged.

Dale's dad recalls when one teacher offered a pull-out program for gifted students in elementary school. The program worked very well for Dale who really enjoyed being challenged. Dale's parent would like to see more programs directed towards gifted children and is concerned that the lack of streaming, students grouped according to ability, focuses the teaching in his words "to go to the lower to the middle and you may be getting that group not too bad but you miss the rest."

Dale's dad went on to suggest accelerating the pace, rather than skipping a grade, so a gifted student might do two grades in one year. He did this in school and found that the increased challenge added to the educational experience.

### *Identification of Gifted Students*

The student participants were all identified in elementary school as being exceptional or outstanding students. However, none of the students were ever formally identified as being gifted. There is no mechanism in place at their present school to identify gifted students. The student participants all are wary about the social implications of being identified as a gifted student.

They are concerned that the gifted label would provide others with a reason to pick on them. As Glenda says, "well it probably would not help the gifted students much. People who stand out more tend to be made fun of. If you are different you better be prepared for a lot of



grief.” Glenda would like it if identification allowed a gifted student to move ahead with support from the teacher.

Wayne, Dale, and Fiona all see the identification of gifted students as more of a benefit than a potential cause of harm. Wayne states that the identification of gifted students “might benefit those students, they might actually give them more challenging tasks so that they are not coasting through like me.” Dale and Fiona both agree with Wayne and feel that any identification of giftedness might result in them being challenged more in the classroom, something they would welcome.

*The Identification of Gifted Students: the Parents’ Mixed Views*

Much like their children, the parents all believe that identification of gifted students would enable teachers to adapt their instruction more effectively to meet the needs of gifted students. However, they expressed concern that this might also lead to social problems as a result of their children being set apart. As Glenda’s mother says, “I don’t think they should be identified because it make them stand out more than they already do.” Wayne’s mother echoes the sentiment of Glenda’s mother, “I think at this level it could possibly hurt them. Kids are so cruel . . . I would be worried about the social implications. Do we need to add something else to the mix of things that kids pick on kids for?”

Dales’s dad feels there is a way to challenge a gifted child without “putting people on a pedestal or suggesting they are better than anyone else.” For Dale’s dad the problem is to avoid elitism but identify giftedness in the same way we identify a learning disability and then use the identification to assist the individual reach his or her full potential.

Fiona’s mother remembers being teased by other students because of being in the gifted

class. She would not want this for her daughter.

### *Social Issues: The Parents' Perspective*

The students could not recall any significant social problems from their school experiences thus far. However, their parents' memories were more specific. Glenda's parents and Wayne's parents both reported that, although their children are not experiencing any social problems now, elementary school presented difficulties for their children.

Glenda's problem in elementary school was, in her mother's words, "she likes to be the mother hen, in control, she liked to be the boss." Glenda felt she knew how things should be done and she willingly shared her knowledge with the other students. This was not appreciated by the other students and she was teased. Glenda worked through her social problems by the end of grade school, she stopped being so bossy and learned to deal with the teasing.

Wayne's social problems began in Grade 3 when he came to school with the wrong pair of shoes, "it was the pair of shoes, a style or colour issue, and people were picking on him and he didn't tell us until long after the issue arose. He was uncomfortable and would rather not have gone to school." Wayne's social problem disappeared by Grade 5 when he was in a split class, Wayne was in the senior year of the split. His parents says, "he got his confidence back and alleviated the harm done in the previous year."

### *A Reflection on the Interview Process*

This investigation yielded five key themes: the students enjoyed school; they found it

easy; they were often bored; they were rarely if ever challenged; and they were almost never identified as being academically talented or given different material from the rest of the class to work on. Summaries and quotes were given to illustrate these themes. A discussion of these themes follows in the next section.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of four gifted students in the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island. To explore what is like to be a gifted student, I used the case study approach. I interviewed four academically gifted learners and their parents using a semi-structured format that allowed the participants to talk openly about any aspect of their educational experiences. The participants, both students and parents, provided the researcher with many insights into the experiences of an academically gifted learner. Throughout the course of the interviews, several themes emerged which were common experiences for all the student participants. Each of the themes noted below are discussed in more detail. The results of this research, that is the themes that emerged, are compared with key findings from the literature review.

The first theme that emerged was enjoyment of the school experience. The participants enjoyed their school experience overall, it was not necessarily the classroom instruction or teachers that they enjoyed, yet taken as a whole which includes extracurricular activities, the band program, and socializing, the student participants report that they enjoy their school experience.

Another theme that emerged early in the research was that the student participants were rarely, if ever, challenged by the work they had to do, by the teachers, or by the curriculum. None of the participants can recall ever having to work hard. None of the participants can recall not being able to perform an educational task. The academic content aspect of school was very

easy for these students.

The instruction and the curriculum were rarely, if ever, differentiated for the group of academically gifted learners who participated in this study. The student participants almost always were taught the same way as the rest of their classmates. Even when these students would routinely finish their work much sooner than the rest of the class and they routinely earned the highest marks, there was no change in the way they were taught or what they were taught. Lack of differentiation of instruction was a common theme for all the participants. Compaction, acceleration, enrichment, and ability grouping are all methods of differentiating the curriculum that were discussed in the literature review and they will be considered in light of the results of this study.

The last major theme that emerged during analysis of the data was that the academic talents of the student participants were never formally recognized. During the selection process for these students, teachers had no difficulties in putting their names forward as the most outstanding students that they taught. However, no one ever communicated to the student participants just how outstanding they were.

The student participants in this research were bored for much of the time they spent in the regular classroom. Although boredom could have been treated as a theme of its own, I will discuss boredom as it relates to the themes already mentioned. The lack of challenge that the student participants found in their educational experience was the cause of a great deal of the boredom the student participants reported in this investigation. A lack of differentiation in the curriculum was the principal cause for the lack of challenge experienced by student participants. Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) suggest that is entirely likely that the academically gifted will

spend a great deal of their time being bored. Kanevsky and Keighley also warn that this boredom can lead to a situation where the gifted learners disengage from school and underachieve because they see it as an honorable course of action; why should they work to achieve in a system that does not teach them? None of the gifted learners in this research have disengaged as a result of boredom but I have seen many other students who have disengaged and are also very talented academically. It would be interesting to find out how prevalent disengaging from the learning process because of boredom is.

It is important that before more detailed critical analyses of themes, we consider again the principal subjects of this research, the student participants who were labeled as academically gifted learners. In light of the current body of research available, how well do the participants in this research match the current descriptions of an academically gifted learner?

The four student participants in this research were selected according to a criteria based on the U.S. Department of Education (1993) definition of giftedness that states “children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared to others of their age, experience, or environment” (as cited in Renzulli, 2002, p.69). The complete definition which is in the literature review, explains that the outstanding talents of a gifted individual might be found in any field of human endeavor and are found in all cultural groups.

The students in this study met the criteria of possessing outstanding talent and performing at remarkably high levels. The definition above requires the individuals to show this outstanding talent in any endeavor, not all endeavors. The participants in this research were outstanding in almost everything they did. They were all described by their teachers as the most superior

students in second language, mathematics, language arts, and music class.

The definition of giftedness from the U.S. Department of Education (1993), also states that “they [the gifted learners] require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools” (as cited in Renzulli, 2002, p.70). The students in this research also fit the definition above regarding the services and activities which are not provided ordinarily in most schools. The school the participants attended has no programs or services of any kind directed towards the students’ unique talents. The British Columbia Ministry of Education Resource Guide (2005) suggests that, in general, gifted students learn faster and work with abstractions more easily than other students, and often have the interests of older students.

It could be argued (Timmons & Woods, 2000) that the French Immersion program that Glenda, Dale, and Wayne are enrolled in is a form of enrichment activity for the gifted learner. Glenda, Dale, and Wayne all confirm that French Immersion does provide a challenge for them, although not a very big one. It could be argued that the band program, which all of the participants participate in, is a form of enrichment activity. The participants all really enjoy being in the band program, but it is impossible to say to what extent the band or French Immersion meets their needs as gifted learners. The problem is that both of these programs are self-selected. What about students who might be gifted learners and are not in any programs that provide them with a challenge? The lack of challenge for these students, according to Kanevsky and Keighley (2003), puts them at risk to underachieve and disengage from classroom learning.

It is doubtful the students in this research are achieving their academic potential in a system that does little to challenge them. All the students in this research report that they have never had to work hard in school; their parents confirm that they have never seen their children

encounter difficult material.

Fiedler et al (2002) argue that we have no problem in schools grouping elite athletes together and then celebrating when they achieve. The elite athletes are challenged by practices which are much more strenuous than a regular gym class. The elite athlete is challenged by competing against the elite athletes of other schools. At the same time we have no mechanism for the academically gifted student in our middle school to find a challenge similar in intensity to what the elite athlete can readily find.

Renzulli and Reis (as cited in Renzulli, 2002) define gifted behavior as an interaction of three clusters of traits: above-average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. The gifted individual is capable of applying these traits to any “valuable area of human performance” (Renzulli & Reis, as cited in Renzulli 2002, p.69). Renzulli and Reis support the U.S. Department of Education’s view that ordinary educational services cannot satisfy the needs of learners who possess the traits associated with gifted behavior mentioned above.

The students in this investigation have above-average ability; they have demonstrated this consistently throughout their academic careers. Renzulli (2002) considers above average ability to encompass the top 15-20% of learners, the participants in this study were ranked in the top of their class. They all possess high levels of task commitment, all confirmed by their parents, and in three cases excelled in numerous extracurricular activities. Creativity was much more challenging to assess in the case of the student participants, although Glenda is working on her book and Fiona’s love of writing poetry and stories were strong indications of high levels of creative achievement. Renzulli says that gifted individuals are capable of directing their



behavior traits of above-average ability, creativeness, and task commitment, towards activities that are beneficial to humanity. However, Renzulli does not think the needs of learners such as those participating in this research can be met in a regular school setting.

The student participants have found ways to channel their creativity, above-average abilities, and their commitment to tasks; unfortunately, according to the students, they do not get an opportunity to employ their gifted traits inside the classroom. I think the band program helps to meet some of the needs of the student participants which might not be met in the regular classroom. The band program provides an opportunity for all four students to be creative, to express their above-average abilities, and to demonstrate commitment to rehearsals and performances. The involvement of three students in activities outside the classroom may in fact serve to fulfill needs which Renzulli reported as often neglected. This is not to say more could not be done to provide the students with the challenge that they all say they would benefit from within their classrooms.

The students in this research could be as far from the norm as students who receive what we call resource, or special education, in the school board. Winebrenner (2000) says in her book *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom* that a student that is gifted and has an IQ of 130 is as far from the norm of 100 as a student with an IQ of 70. The struggling student or the student with special needs obviously requires assistance and a different curriculum to achieve success. Winebrenner argues that the gifted student also has needs that are not met by the regular classroom and curriculum, unfortunately their needs may not be as obvious.

During the course of this investigation, I learned many things about educating academically gifted learners. A great deal of research had been done before the first interview

was done. I did not think that there would be any great surprises upon meeting the participants. There was one great surprise. The students participants really enjoy the school experience. The interview transcripts tell only a piece of the story. The background story would tell you how much the student participants are involved in school life and the enthusiasm they bring to the classroom. They all love band classes. Even Wayne, who says he would rather be at home reading or sleeping than come to school, admits that he really likes band. Wayne loves the sound of the many different instruments all playing the pieces well and producing the intended sound. Grudgingly he admits that he also enjoys mathematics, physical education when it is not first aid, home economics, and language arts. It is the teachers of certain subjects that he objects to, not the actual courses.

Dale loves his social life and all the sports. Fiona is easy to please and likes everything except for science. Glenda is into everything and has more interests than time would seemingly allow a person to participate in. However, running parallel to this enjoyment of school is a tremendous amount of boredom. Gallagher (1997) reports that one of the most persistent attitudes of gifted students regarding the curriculum is “that their classes are a crushing bore” (p. 132). Gallagher suggests that as a result of trying to teach everyone in the heterogeneous classroom, gifted students do not receive instruction that has a level of complexity appropriate to their ability levels. The participants in this study frequently reported that the classroom was often a very boring place. How then can the same students also find the school experience so enjoyable?

I believe we must look at the complete school picture to understand the student participants’ enjoyment of school. The students in this research were either 13 or 14 years old;

even though they are academically gifted they are still young teenagers. They come to school to learn, but they also come to school to do many other things. They spend a large portion of their time in school and school work is not the only thing done in this environment. The school day for a typical student at our school is 6 ½ hours before any extracurricular activities. Instructional time per day is 5 hours. Therefore, time on task is definitely under 5 hours; for example, class changes and attendance come out of the instructional time. Lunch, recess, home room periods, administration time, and group work, all provide time for socializing and fun. The students in this research have found a way to do things they enjoy within framework of the day. Actual schoolwork takes very little time for these students.

Further research might be able to help educators understand just how important the social life of an academically gifted learner is. Are academically gifted learners significantly different from the average learner with respect to how they like to spend their time at school? I found a tremendous amount of information while doing the literature search regarding what was not working for gifted students and what they did not like, but very little about what they enjoyed outside academics and challenging activities. I did not find any research that linked enjoyment to academically gifted students and that might provide insight into how much enjoyment gifted students find in the classroom and in the school generally.

As mentioned earlier it was a shock to me how much the student participants enjoyed their school experience. I know that we do not routinely celebrate academic success at my school, informally perhaps, but not like we celebrate athletic success. Athletic success is broadcast daily over the announcements and results are published in the local newspaper. There are academic awards at the end of the year, however the biggest awards are for those combining

scholastic achievement with athletics.

Tannenbaum (1962, as cited in Wallace, 2000) found that high-achieving, bright, male athletes enjoyed the highest status in the school. Take out the athletic component and high-achieving, bright males occupy the lowest status position in the school. In fact, Tannenbaum (1962, as cited in Wallace 2000) found that low-achieving, non-athletic males actually enjoyed higher status than their high-achieving non-athletic counterparts. A student can actually raise his status if he is a male and starts achieving less. Prior to conducting this study I would not have predicted that students who have outstanding academic talents, like the participants in this research, would enjoy school so much because I reasoned their status would be low. Dale is outstanding in everything he does including athletics, so it is not surprising that he enjoys school so much. Wayne though is not overly athletic yet still enjoys school. Wayne's status never emerged as an issue. Neither one of the female participants, Glenda or Fiona seemed to have any problem with status.

Obviously it is possible that my selection process for participants was flawed and I may have missed gifted students who were not enjoying their school experience. These could have been students that have gifts in areas other than academics, and therefore were not recognized by teachers, or students that were not achieving despite being gifted. Wallace (2000) says that although many gifted students do well in school many do not due to "learning disabilities, emotional problems, or poor study skills, or they have given up on their school's ability to excite them" (p.45). Another large factor that cannot be ignored is the affect of family on the learner.

Each of the participants in this study had strong support from family. Their parents were very enthusiastic about participating in this research. The parents clearly communicated their

willingness to do whatever would benefit their children. All of the parents were actively involved in the day-to-day life of their children. This support of the children by the parents is a bias in this research.

The support offered by the parents in this research extended beyond time and interest to financial support. All the participants in this study could be considered middle-class. Not all gifted learners would have the family support that was given in the case of the participants in this research. Willms (2001) concluded that socio-economic status and good family support are two statistically significant factors in student achievement. Poverty adversely affects school performance. The more money a student's family has the greater the likelihood that a student will succeed in school. Willms also concluded that for children who did not have a supportive family situation, the most important factor contributing to what he calls resiliency is a strong mentor relationship.

The subjects in this study had strong family support and middle-class socio-economic status. How much these two factors contribute towards their enjoyment of school is impossible to say based on this exploratory investigation. It was simply beyond the scope of this study to look at students from all different socio-economic backgrounds and family support structures. More research will be required to answer the many questions related to what contributes to the enjoyment of gifted students in school.

An area that has been researched thoroughly, not necessarily completely, is that of challenge, or more specifically the lack of challenge for academically gifted learners. All of the participants in this research, the students and the parents, were in agreement that the educational system did not challenge the type of student involved in this research. The parents of Fiona,

Glenda, and Dale expressed deep concerns regarding the lack of challenge and the what the future impact of this lack of challenge would have on their children.

Dale and Fiona's parents have had other children that were very talented academically go through the system and they found the lack of challenge led to more problems as time went on. Their other children became disengaged, Fiona's brother dropped out of school before he completed high school. Dale's father also felt his children were disadvantaged when they went to universities outside of Prince Edward Island because they had not had challenging high school courses to prepare them in the way students from other provinces had. Dale's father had talked with parents of other students who attended universities outside of Prince Edward Island and he says they all felt the same way, their children would have benefitted from a more challenging education in Prince Edward Island schools.

An interesting research project would involve comparing the university academic results of Prince Edward Island academically gifted high school graduates with the results of academically gifted high school graduates that were educated in other parts of Canada. This research could be directed specifically to investigating the effect of offering challenging programs directed towards more advanced learners in high school on their university educations.

Glenda's parents worry that she will not have the necessary study skills when she eventually has to put forth an effort at school, something that has never happened thus far. They have tried to challenge Glenda by enrolling her in French Immersion and she is also taking a correspondence course to complete her Grade 10 mathematics while she is in Grade 9. Glenda's parents said that they noticed she was frustrated in her correspondence course and wanted to quit at one point because she had to complete a test for work she had not been taught. She had never

been in a position where she did not understand the work and did not realize that she could get a textbook for her Grade 10 course and study the material prior to testing. As noted in the results section, Glenda had never had to study or work hard in her schooling before this experience.

Wayne is the first child through the educational system in his family, and his parents are not concerned that the lack of challenge will hurt him academically in the future, although they would like to see him challenged more. Wayne's parents may be less concerned with the lack of challenge in the school system because he has been so successful thus far in school. Another consideration may be the fact that they have not had prior experiences with the educational system similar to Fiona and Dale's parents.

The students who participated in this investigation realized that they were not faced with challenging material, yet as mentioned earlier they still enjoyed school. They were resigned to the lack of challenge and were happy over all with their school experience. However, the situation might be considerably different had they been exposed to a more rigorous challenging program and then been asked how they felt about the program's removal. The band program was a favorite activity for all the students in this study, but would they have regretted the removal of a band program had there never been one?

The students who attended the Saturday Enrichment Program (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee, 2004) were exposed to a challenging program and yet the majority of them did not actively seek more challenging activities when they returned to their normal school setting. However, almost half of the students in Olszewski-Kubilius and Lee's study, despite not seeking more challenging activities, reported that they received more challenging work. This challenge took the form of enrichment, acceleration, gifted programs, and gifted groupings. Perhaps as students

are exposed to more challenging material, it becomes a more normal experience, rather than the exception, and once exposed they seek the challenging work without being aware they are seeking it.

If the decision is made at the school board level to challenge all students, including academically gifted learners, the debate could begin in earnest; could all students be challenged in the same room or would grouping the students by ability facilitate more challenging learning opportunities.

Tomlinson (1999) suggests that the only way to challenge all students including the academically gifted students is to move towards differentiated classrooms where “teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student’s road map for learning is identical to anyone else’s” (p. 9).

Only one of the participants in this research, Dale, had experienced a differentiation of instruction which involved a pull-out from the regular class for a high ability grouping. Both Dale and his father agreed that the experience was worthwhile and that Dale was challenged in the program. Dale’s father was accelerated and would have liked the same opportunity for his children. He would prefer a system where the acceleration process would ensure that no material from the year missed would be required in the subsequent year. Missing necessary material was the only reservation regarding acceleration Dale’s father expressed. Ideally, he would recommend implementation of a program such as the Program for Exceptionally Gifted Students (Sullivan, 2002) where students take two years of study concurrently.

All the student participants and their parents, with the exception of Dale’s parent noted



above, are wary of any program that would see students accelerated as a method of differentiating the instruction. Teachers at our school are also wary about acceleration, apparently like teachers elsewhere. “While many educators resist acceleration as a strategy, educational research overwhelmingly supports it. Acceleration has been shown to be positive for both achieving and underachieving gifted learners in the majority of documented cases” (Benbow & Stanley, 1983; Kulik & Kulik, 1992, as cited in British Columbia Ministry of Education Resource Guide, 2005).

This year at our school a student was accelerated. This student was outstanding in all academic areas but did not meet the criteria for this research as she was not in band. She had moved from Grade 8 to Grade 9 in the first quarter of the school year and graduated at the top of her class. It is interesting that the student participants in this research were all in agreement that acceleration had been a successful experience for the student mentioned above, yet they were not enthusiastic about acceleration as a choice for themselves. As with the concept of more challenging work, these students might support the strategy of acceleration, with more examples of it in their school.

Other methods of differentiating instruction, such as compaction and enrichment, are completely dependent on the individual teacher at this time within our school system. Enrichment and compaction have never been used for the students in this investigation with the exception of Dale’s pull-out enrichment experience. This is not surprising when we consider the research of Cashion and Sullenger (2002) which revealed the difficulties teachers had in differentiating instruction within a heterogeneous-ability classroom after they had participated in a four-week workshop directed towards teaching gifted students in the regular classroom. Two

years after the workshop, most teachers had attempted some of the strategies offered but few teachers had made any major change in the way they taught. My own experience resounded well with the experiences of the teachers in Cashion and Sullenger's study. While familiar with strategies such as compaction and enrichment, I struggle to find the time required to implement them. Like the teachers Cashion and Sullenger describe, I implement whole class strategies that engage higher-order thinking embedded in exciting tasks, rocket-building for example, but the one-on-one time is not there to spend with students unless their behavior interrupts the class or their academic needs require my extra attention. Grouping by ability is offered as a solution to this problem (Fiedler et al., 2002; Rogers, 2002)

The four students in this study indicated that they would like to be with classmates of similar ability to some degree but are all worried about how this might be implemented. Dale, Glenda, and Wayne all stated explicitly they would like to be grouped with other students of higher ability so they could pursue more challenging work. This leads back to the problems with the identification of gifted learners. The danger the participants anticipate is that they could be seen as different, and as a result experience first hand being persecuted, or they may be seen as being elite, which they say is to be avoided other than in sports. Rogers' (2002) meta-analysis of the literature on ability grouping concluded that it is the only way that academically gifted students can reach their full potential. If she is right, then a shift in thinking about the potential of ability grouping to help our community of learners will be most helpful in the PEI school system.

Small steps, such as pull-outs directed towards enrichment, might improve everyone's comfort level, teachers, parents, and students, with the idea of differentiating instruction, rather

than grouping by ability full-time. Borland et al (2002) address the issues of acceleration and ability grouping through a review of over 20 years of the literature and conclude that the practical answer might be a flexible grouping arrangement where students are identified on a subject by subject basis and groups are constructed which are not permanent in nature. The lack of permanent grouping would allow teachers the flexibility to control the duration of grouping. For example, in math a geometry grouping might be different from groupings dedicated to studying fractions. Borland et al admit that scheduling flexible groupings can be a tremendous amount of work for administrators and that it is not an easy strategy to implement. A benefit of flexible grouping is that it weakens the charges that ability grouping is elitist because the composition of the groupings would hopefully change if all individuals' strengths were recognized. This takes the discussion back to where it began, how do you identify outstanding talents that would qualify an individual for any form of differentiated instruction.

Dale is the only participant in this study who had received instruction directed towards gifted students. However, neither he nor the other participants have been identified as being gifted. All student participants were surprised when they were selected for this investigation. They were not accustomed to having their outstanding talents formally recognized by anyone other than comments on elementary report cards that used phrases such as "outstanding ability," "excellent work," etc. Even though they were surprised to be included in this research and they had not been formally identified as being gifted, the student participants in this study all had an awareness of who the other students were with abilities similar to their own. Despite all the procedures used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, two of the participants, Glenda and Wayne, managed to figure out that they were both involved in the same research.

### *Recommendation for Action*

If the Western School Board of Prince Edward Island develops an enrichment program directed towards gifted learners, identification will most certainly become an issue. Hopefully, not only the students with obvious outstanding talent like the participants in this research will be identified, but also the groups that often get missed. Stormont (2001) cautions that girls, the poor, and students with learning disabilities, will often not have their gifts identified. Girls will often hide their gifts because their stereotypes do not include girls achieving at a high level academically. Girls according to Stormont will actually make an effort to underperform on intelligence tests as they move through adolescence because they see it as more socially acceptable not to do well. Twice as many boys as girls are in gifted programs (Stormont) because girls tend to avoid more challenging courses and hide their talents.

Poorer students will be overlooked in the identification process in many cases because they lack the resources to develop their talents (Stormont, 2001). Any learning disability has the potential to mask a student's gifts, making identification of giftedness difficult. For instance, dyslexia that might affect reading ability could lower performance in all areas that involved reading (McCoach et al., 2001).

The debate about how to identify giftedness must be preceded by a desire to identify giftedness, which at the present time has not been reached in Prince Edward Island. The Prince Edward Island Task Force on Student Achievement Report (Kurial, 2005) has recommended that the Department of Education "develop a strategy for students who need academic enrichment" (p.6). There is no mention of academically gifted students in the Task Force Report. It is my feeling that the greatest impediment to gifted education or an enrichment program in Prince

Edward Island is resistance to anything that hints of elitism. Both the parent and the student participants in this study were wary about anything that would formally identify students as being different. Different is seen by the participants in this research as grounds for persecution. Hopefully, an enrichment program would raise the comfort level with differentiating the curriculum in a way that provides talented learners with a challenge, something the learners in this study say is rarely presented to them.

I have witnessed first-hand the wonderful successes we have had as educators with students in special needs or resource programs. Students with special needs come to school and are engaged and excited about learning. I believe it is only reasonable the students with outstanding talents have a similar opportunity to learn, to be engaged, and to be excited about school.

I think that challenge to teach in a way that allows all students to learn demands a differentiation of instruction similar to what Carol Tomlinson (2002) or Reis, Burns, and Renzulli (1992) suggest where every student is seen as an individual with their own distinct learning path. More resources and more teachers would help this process, but the key factor is a teacher who is willing to deviate from a one lesson plan-for-all approach. Lupart (2001) insists that the gifted learner is unique like any other learner, and that the system including all educators must move away from trying to fit the learner into the program; we have to adapt programs to the needs of each learner in the classroom. Teachers will need more than simply reading about the concept of differentiation of instruction; I believe the modeling and demonstration of successful classrooms is a key to school improvement for gifted and talented students. In order for teachers to be successful at the classroom level, they will need support in their school, and the school will

need to be supported by the province. What follows are my recommendations to improve the educational experience for gifted students based on this exploratory research and a review of the current literature.

### *Recommendations*

Any plan to improve the education of students in Prince Edward Island, gifted or otherwise, will involve the province, the individual school, and the classroom teacher. The Province, through the Department of Education has the pivotal role to play in that there has to be an acceptance of the idea of a gifted learner. Currently, as discussed earlier, Kurial (2005) has recognized a need to provide enrichment so that all students can reach their full potential. There will need to be direction from the province to make changes at the school level and the classroom level. This study recommends establishing a position in the Department of Education to advocate for gifted students as we currently have for needy students, with the end goal of establishing a program for gifted learners.

What follows are recommendations for changes at the school level. At the school level there is a strong need to help them identify gifted children and to differentiate instruction accordingly so that the school makes a more comprehensive effort to fit the students' needs rather than trying to make every student fit an existing program (Lupart, 2001).

This study calls for a school level response to remove the stigma of elitism. If programs for gifted students cannot fit into a school's culture, then that culture will need to be changed to accommodate the new programs.

If acceleration is used as an option for gifted learners, the school has an important role to play, not just in allowing acceleration, but in ensuring that the transition is smooth. The attitudes

of the school community will have to be considered and an awareness of acceleration possibilities deepened and disseminated.

The school also has an important role to play in scheduling to make possible more flexible grouping of students for instruction (Borland et al., 2002). Flexible groupings will allow a more specific focus in teaching but also create new challenges involving scheduling problems. These need not be insurmountable. The school must nurture multiple environments for the learning to take place, where it really happens (Lupart, 2001), in the classroom.

This study concludes with several recommendations for changes at the classroom level pertaining to the education of gifted learners. Prince Edward Island classrooms aim explicitly to be inclusive educational environments (Kurial, 2005). In order for classroom teachers to meet the needs of all learners in a classroom they will need help from the school and the province. Inclusion means every teacher needs to teach gifted students as well as every other student in the class. Lupart(2001) suggests that if a student is removed from the class for any specialized instruction, for evermore they are a visitor in the regular classroom and it is a barrier to inclusive education. If students and teachers are supported in the classroom there will be less need to remove students for specialized instruction outside the classroom.

For an inclusive classroom to provide education to a gifted learners, the classroom teacher will need to be able to practice compaction, to differentiate the curriculum, to identify individual strengths and weaknesses, and to set-up flexible groupings. As Cashion and Sullenger (2002) noted, even after specialized instruction for teachers in delivering instruction to gifted learners, it is difficult for classroom teachers to implement strategies that meet the needs of gifted learners. To make individual classrooms work, there is a need for educators who are successful

at delivering gifted programs to guide and mentor their colleagues in the profession. As Lupart (2001) argues, increasingly the classroom teacher is responsible for the complete range of learners in the inclusive classroom environment and the success of any program will come down to the individual teacher's professional preparation, experience, and instructional planning and delivery. It is the responsibility of the Department of Education to facilitate professional development that is necessary to meet the challenges that Lupart describes.

I see a future where the gifted student is like a canary in the mine; while it sings everyone else is fine. When the canary dies, probably from boredom, everyone is at risk, it is just not as obvious. In the Prince Edward Island education system, we have yet to identify the canaries. Our education system in Prince Edward Island would seem to be years behind many jurisdictions in terms of the education of our most talented students. Luckily, there is a tremendous amount of research based programs that have a solid basis in theory that could close the gap in terms of educating students that require more challenge in their education. I hope this study, which attempted to tell the stories of four very talented students who are still waiting for their challenging learning experiences in school, will help in some small way to illustrate the need for programs directed towards learners that are academically talented.



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## Appendix A

### Sample Letter to the School Board

Superintendent Western School Board

Western School Board

I am writing to request permission to conduct research at \_\_\_\_\_. I am conducting this study as a requirement for the degree of Master of Education at the University of Prince Edward Island under the supervision of Dr. Vianne Timmons.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of gifted children in the Western School Board of P.E.I.. The study that I am interested in doing is exploratory in nature, therefore it is difficult to be more specific about my research.

My information will be collected from a very small group of students, at least 14 years old, with their parents present during interviews. I will also be interviewing their parents. I will obtain permission to record data during these interviews. These tapes will be used for research only and will be destroyed after completion of the Master's thesis. Pseudonyms will be used at all times to protect the confidentiality of the material collected.

The participants will have the right to refuse or terminate participation in the study, at any time. Participation is voluntary. The identity of the school and the people involved will not be revealed or used for evaluation purposes.

Should you require additional information, please contact me at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED] ext

110. A copy of the draft of the research proposal is available upon request.

If you have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the UPEI Research Ethics Board at 566-0637 or by e-mail at [ord@upei.ca](mailto:ord@upei.ca).

Your signature below indicates your acceptance of the above request but you may withdraw your consent at any time. I will return a copy of this signed letter of consent for your records.

Sincerely,

Carl Arnold

Graduate Student, University of Prince Edward Island

**I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to allow the above study to be conducted at this site.**

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

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

## Appendix B

### Sample Letter for the Principal

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am writing to ask permission to conduct a research study with three students at \_\_\_\_\_ . This study is a requirement for the degree of Master of Education at the University of Prince Edward Island.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of gifted children in the Western School Board of P.E.I.. The study that I am interested in doing is exploratory in nature, therefore it is difficult to be more specific about my research.

My information will be collected from a very small group of students, about 3, at least 14 years old, with their parents present during interviews. I will also be interviewing their parents. I will obtain permission to record data during these interviews. These tapes will be used for research only and will be destroyed after completion of the Master's thesis. Pseudonyms will be used at all times to protect the confidentiality of the material collected.

The participants will have the right to refuse or terminate participation in the study, at any time. Participation is voluntary. The identity of the school and the people involved will not be revealed or used for evaluation purposes.

Should you require additional information, please contact me at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] A copy of the draft of the research proposal is available upon request.

If you have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the UPEI

Research Ethics Board at 566-0637 or by e-mail at [ord@upei.ca](mailto:ord@upei.ca).

Your signature below indicates your acceptance of the above request but you may withdraw your consent at any time. I will return a copy of this signed letter of consent for your records.

Sincerely,

Carl Arnold

Graduate Student, University of Prince Edward Island

**I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to allow the above study to be conducted at this site.**

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

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



## Appendix C

### Sample Letter for Parents and Children

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Your child has been invited to participate in a research study at \_\_\_\_\_.

I am writing to ask permission for you and your child to participate in this study. I am conducting this study as a requirement for the degree of Master of Education at the University of Prince Edward Island.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of gifted children in the Western School Board of P.E.I.. The study that I am interested in doing is exploratory in nature, therefore it is difficult to be more specific about my research.

My information will be collected from a very small group of students, about 3, at least 14 years old. Each student will have his/her parents present during interviews. I will also be interviewing the parents of the students that participate in this study. I will obtain permission to record data during these interviews. These tapes will be used for research only and will be destroyed after completion of the Master's thesis. Pseudonyms will be used at all times to protect the confidentiality of the material collected.

The participants will have the right to refuse or terminate participation in the study, at any time. Participation is voluntary. The identity of the school and the people involved will not be revealed or used for evaluation purposes.

However, due to the small nature of the province there is always a possibility that participants could be identified from the information they disclose.

Should you require additional information, please contact me at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] A copy of the draft of the research proposal is available upon request.

If you have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the UPEI Research Ethics Board at 566-0637 or by e-mail at [ord@upei.ca](mailto:ord@upei.ca)

Your signature below indicates your acceptance of the above request but you may withdraw your consent at any time. I will return a copy of this signed letter of consent for your records.

Sincerely,

Carl Arnold

Graduate Student, University of Prince Edward Island

## Appendix D

## CONSENT FORM -PARENTS

I have read and understand the material in the information letter. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that my child has the freedom to withdraw at any time and to not answer any question if my child so desires.

I understand that the information will be confidential within the limits of the law. I understand that I can keep a copy of the signed and dated consent form.

If I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this study, I understand that I can contact the UPEI Research Ethics Board at (902)566-0637, or by e-mail at [ord@upei.ca](mailto:ord@upei.ca).

Your signature below indicates your acceptance of the above request but you may withdraw your consent at any time.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to the participation of myself and my child in the abovementioned study at \_\_\_\_\_.

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

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

## Appendix E

## CONSENT FORM -STUDENTS

I have read and understand the material in the information letter. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I have the freedom to drop out of the study at any time. I can also refuse to answer any question.

I understand that the information will be confidential within the limits of the law. I understand that I can keep a copy of the signed and dated consent form.

If I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this study, I understand that I can contact the UPEI Research Ethics Board at (902)566-0637, or by e-mail at [ord@upei.ca](mailto:ord@upei.ca).

Your signature below indicates your acceptance of the above request but you may withdraw your consent at any time.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to the participate in the  
abovementioned study at \_\_\_\_\_.

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

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

## Appendix F

### READ TO INTERVIEWEES BEFORE INTERVIEW STARTED

I am interested in exploring the educational experiences of gifted students or students that have outstanding talent.

I have tried to select students for my research that fit the definition of giftedness that comes from U.S. Department of Education (1993):

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavour. (p.26.)

I want to make it clear that the students selected for my research have not been diagnosed as gifted by myself or anyone else associated with this research.

I have selected you to be invited to participate in this research based on conversations with the teachers of math, language arts, French, and music in our school. Some of your teachers have described you as having outstanding talent in the subjects that they teach you.

Appendix G  
Questions asked in semi-structured interviews  
(The researcher probed and diverted according to responses)

First round of questions: Directed towards the student participants

Questions about the research

1. What is your understanding of what I am trying to research?
2. What did you think about being selected as a participant in this research?
3. What do you think being gifted means?
4. How would you feel if other students in your school found out that you were involved in this research because you were gifted?

General questions about giftedness

5. How would you feel if a person called you gifted?
6. Tell me about a time when being called gifted or outstanding was a good thing.
7. Tell me about a time when being called gifted or outstanding was a bad thing.  
There wasn't one.
8. Without using names, can you think of examples of a situation where a person you knew has been gifted in some areas and not in others. For example, where a person was gifted in math but not in language arts?

Questions about the individual's giftedness

9. Can you describe yourself as being gifted?
10. What areas might you be gifted in?
11. How have teachers talked about your abilities?

General questions about school experiences

12. How do you find school?
13. What do you like the best?

14. What do you like the least?
15. Describe a time when you found school easy.
16. Describe a time when you found school hard.
17. How often do you find school hard?
18. How often do you find school easy?
19. What parts are easy?
20. What parts are hard?
21. What has been your favourite year in school so far? Why?
22. What has been your least favourite year in school so far? Why?
23. How have teachers changed the way they taught you based on your performance?
24. What ability level would you like your fellow students to have in comparison to your own?
25. Tell me how you learn best.

Questions regarding social relationships

26. How do you generally get along with your fellow students?
27. Describe your friends academic abilities in comparison to yours.
28. When have you associated with any other students that you would consider gifted?
29. How many good friends do you have that do not attend your school?
30. How many good friends do you have at your school?

Questions regarding family relationships

31. Tell me about how your siblings find school.
32. How do your siblings feel about your school performance?
33. How do your parents think you get along in school?

34. Describe your parent's expectations of you in school.

Questions about aspirations

35. What would you like to change about your education?

36. Imagine a new student is starting at your school. The new student is similar in ability to yourself. What would you say to them about what they should expect from their school experience?

37. Do you have any idea what you might like to work at later in life?

38. What are some of your goals for later in life?

Wrap-up

39. What question would you ask a gifted student if you could only ask them one thing?

40. Could you answer the question above?

41. What would you like to say about your school experiences that we have not covered?

42. What are your thoughts about this interview?

Second round of questions: Directed towards student participants.

Easy, lack of challenge.

Tell me about how you handle classes that you find easy. Probe

How could you make a subject interesting for a student like yourself. Probe

How would you feel if a task in school was challenging? Probe.

How would you approach a challenging task? Probe.

Fun

Tell me about when you have the most fun at school. Probe

Really like school

Is French Immersion a factor in your enjoyment of school?(where applicable)



What makes French immersion so important to you?

How would you feel about French Immersion ending?

How does band influence your enjoyment of school? Probe.

How would you feel if the band program ended?

What is it about band that makes it so much fun for you?

What would you do to replace band in your life?

What other classes or programs could be added to increase your enjoyment of school?

Formal identification

How would you identify gifted kids in our school? Probe.

Who would it benefit if gifted kids were identified?

Who would it harm if gifted kids were identified?

What might it be like to be in a class of gifted kids? Probe.

Differentiation of instruction

How much time do teachers spend teaching you in a particular class?

What do you think when all students of all abilities get the same instruction?

Do you know what resource teachers do? Probe.

Would it be a good idea to have specific programs for gifted kids?

Why or Why not?

Social interactions

How important is it to have friends that are the same age? Probe.

How important is it to have friends who do as well in school as you do? Probe.

How do you feel about skipping grades?

What are your views on having a class of gifted students of different ages.

Third round of questions: Directed to the parents.

Background

Tell me when you first realized that \_\_\_\_\_ was talented, outstanding, gifted etc.

How did they find the early years of school?

4-6?

Middle school?

In what areas are they talented?

Are there areas they struggle in? What areas? How?

How has the educational system served your child so far?

What do you think the future will be like for \_\_\_\_\_ in school?

Easy, lack of challenge.

Tell me about how you handle classes that you find easy. Probe

How could you make a subject interesting for a student like yourself. Probe

How would you feel if a task in school was challenging? Probe.

How would you approach a challenging task? Probe.

Fun

Tell me about when you have the most fun at school. Probe

Really like school

Is French Immersion a large factor in \_\_\_\_\_ enjoyment of school? (where applicable)

What makes French immersion so important to \_\_\_\_\_?

How would you feel about French Immersion ending?

How does band influence \_\_\_\_\_ enjoyment of school? Probe.

How would you feel if the band program ended?

What other classes or programs could or should be added to increase the enjoyment of a student like \_\_\_\_\_ in school?

Formal identification

How would you identify gifted kids in our school? Probe.

What sort of job has the educational system done in terms of identifying your child as being outstanding, gifted, etc.

Who would it harm if gifted kids were identified?

What might it be like to be in a class of gifted kids? Probe.

No differentiation of instruction

-only in rare instances are they singled out for special attention

Tell me about a time when \_\_\_\_\_ received a different kind of instruction.

What do you think when all students of all abilities get the same instruction?

Do you know what resource teachers do? Probe.

Would it be a good idea to have specific programs for gifted kids?

How might they work?

Why or Why not?

Social interactions

How important is for a student like \_\_\_\_\_ to have friends that are the same age? Probe.

How important is it that \_\_\_\_\_ has friends that do as well in school as \_\_\_\_\_? Probe.

How do you feel about skipping grades?

What are your views on having a class of gifted students of different ages.

Wrap-up

Any questions I should have asked?

Any issues you would like to bring up?

What is one important thing you would like to see added to the educational system for your child?